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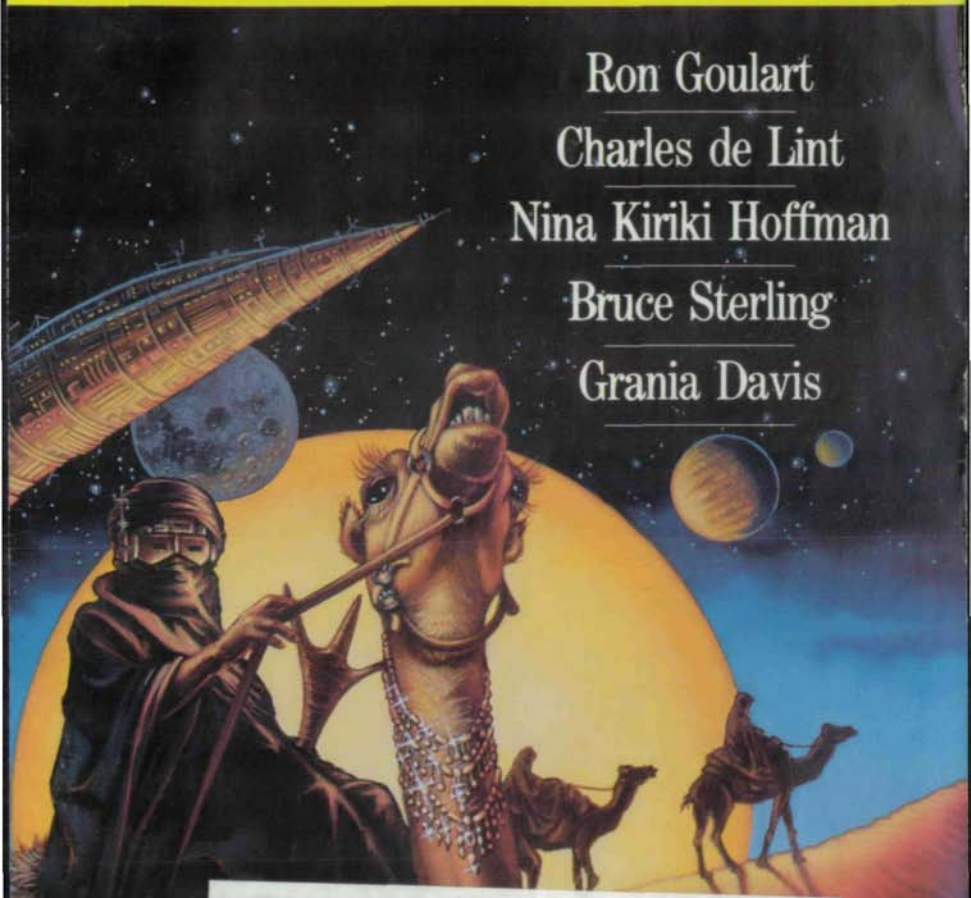

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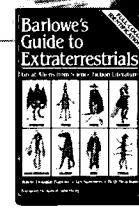

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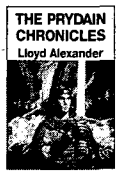

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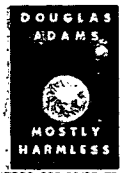

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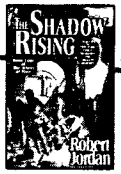

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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AUGUST • 44th Year of Publication

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE MOMENT was a small one in a long and arduous trip. That moment, now a month old, did not become an epiphany until an hour ago. Let me see if I can explain:

I have just come from a long, dry, and rather irritating discussion of ethics and the writer. Professional writers often discuss their work in terms of business. (Should one write a series novel (clearly commercial) or a big novel (possibly art) or follow one's muse (definitely art)? Can a writer do all three?) Rarely do writers discuss theme or motivation ("You see, I was trying to show the family as a microcism for Germany in the 1930s") because they have learned that it sounds pretentious. Or perhaps they feel, rightly so, that the work should speak for itself.

I am in a unique position. I write and I edit. As a writer, I should not discuss the work, and as an editor, I must. Readers, at least those lucky enough to have friends with similar tastes, *always* discuss the work.

My sister Sandy, who teaches first-year college English in Minneapolis, and I conspired against her students in March. I was to speak to their class. Instead of discussing the writing life, Sandy suggested that I give the students two of my stories. Then, she said, the students could ask the writer *face-to-face* what a story meant.

I warned her that I wouldn't be able to tell them. I warned her that sometimes I didn't see a story's deeper meaning until years later — if the story had deeper meaning at all. I let her choose the work. She chose two: one about a woman coming to terms with divorce, and another about a man dealing with the death of his wife.

As predicted, I could not always explain the thoughts I had while writing the stories. I struggled when a student asked me why I had used tears as a metaphor in one piece. Another student got angry when I told him that his interpretation of a story, which differed from mine, was probably the correct one.

But the epiphany — the moment that is still so clear to me that I can close my eyes and see it — came toward the end of the session. A

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woman in the center of the classroom, a woman in her thirties who had clearly returned to college, asked me why I had chosen to write a story from the viewpoint of a woman who was slowly realizing she was unhappily married.

I could have given her the flip, writerly answer, and did, in fact, consider it. "The character interested me," I could have said, and the class would have gone on, as if nothing happened. But something in the intent way she watched me, in the way she rolled her pencil between her fingers, made me pause and talk about the work.

"At the time I wrote the story," I said, "I was dealing with my own divorce."

The woman smiled, nodded, set her pencil down, and said, "Thank you." Nothing more. The class continued. But at that moment, I knew what had happened between us was the very essence of writing: We communicated.

I later learned that the woman had been evaluating her own marriage, and that, perhaps because of her situation, she had found the story evocative. Others in the room liked the story, but that woman had *understood.*

The epiphany, though, was not for her. It was for me. After that long, tedious discussion this evening, I wondered why I write fiction. I certainly don't do it so that I can debate the merits of fantasy fiction over science fiction, nor do I do it to see if I can write literary novels instead of commercial books. I write for moments like the one in the class, moments I never usually see, moments when my story communicates directly to a reader.

As an editor, I realize that such communication is often imperfect. Readers react to stories differently. As an editor, I try to keep the table of contents of this magazine diverse, so that each reader will find at least one story gem in each issue.

As a reader, I delight in those moments of communication. I take books like Anita Shreve's *Strange Fits of Passion*, or Nina Kiriki Hoffman's *The Thread That Binds the Bones*, and I shove them into the hands of other readers, hoping to find a kindred soul who will share the same reading experience, who will understand the writer's communication in the same way that I did.

Yes, there are times to discuss writerly ethics — who sells what to whom and why — but those discussions should not be paramount. What we as writers, readers and editors must never forget is the reason we are here in the first place: to communicate. We open doors, have great conversations, and enjoy ourselves as much as possible.

And perhaps, as an added bonus, we get to glimpse a piece of another person's soul.

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R. Garcia y Robertson has written a number of wonderful stories for F&SF. His novel, The Spiral Dance, recently released from Avon Books, is based on some of those stories. Here, he inspires Jill Bauman's lovely cover artwork. "The Siren Shoals" is wide ranging science fiction with a fantasy feel — not quite space opera— but with the same grungy sense of wonder.

The Siren Shoals

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Out of the Abyss

ERIK HAD LEARNED TO EXpect the worst from the Universe, but to come so far, then find this system occupied was disheartening.

("Grandson, sensors show you are in deep shit.")

"Just report, Grandma Omphale. Let me analyze." He did not need a dead old lady to tell him he was in trouble. Erik was coming out of the interstellar abyss, light-years from nowhere, expecting to find a sanctuary, and his neutrino detectors yammered like it was yacht review on Regatta Day.

("Two starships insystem, and a half dozen small craft.")

Erik studied the configuration, then blanked the stereo-tank. At full polarization the screen reflected back every photon of light, becoming a perfect mirror. Straightening his neck-cloth, he stared moodily at his reflection. He was wearing a 3V jacket, tuned to show a reduced image of local space. Head, hands, and lower limbs looked normal, but from the cravat down his torso was a blank irregular hole, filled by the strange constellations

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of Sculptoris sector — as though he could see through his body, and the bulkhead behind him, into the starry void. A hollow man. Had he somehow hit the wrong system? That would be a truly uncanny bit of bad navigation. "Grandma Omphale, check the star and planetary bodies against the *System's Guide.*"

("Sorry, Grandson — G1 star; second planet with four moons, nitro-oxy atmosphere, blue seas; trio of gas giants farther out. Nothing wrong with navigation. Someone moved in.")

But who? This deep in the Outback, he could hardly count on meeting an acquaintance, much less a friend. After fleeing Fomalhaut B, Erik had headed toward the South Galactic Pole, running for thirty parsecs at right angles to the Milky Way, hoping to get so lost even the Imp Navy could not find him. Now he could neither run, fight, nor present plausible excuses — his ship was a Fornax Skylark, a slow, toothless gravity drive yacht, stolen in his escape from Fomalhaut B. It was the only interstellar vessel Erik could lay hands on with a fully stocked cellarette and a five-star galley.

(Grandma Omphale rattled off data — dead for four centuries now, external sensors were her sole joy, her link to the world outside Erik's augmented memory — "Powerplant emissions show the big ship is Empire-built, colony class....") Erik pictured the starship, big and round as a small moon, crammed with living quarters, robo-construction equipment, retrobred reptiles, all the people, animals, and vehicles for a pre-fab settlement. (The family historian, Grandma Philonoe, came up with a name, *Cape Colony.* "...launched early in the last century from Tau Ceti. Destined for settlement in the Deneb Kaitos, contact lost, never arrived, fate unknown — *until now.*") Erik nodded. The smaller insystem ships would be *Cape Colony*'s pinnace and cargo lighters. Constructed in orbit, colony ships could never survive the stress of atmospheric landing — they broke and burned like aluminum under a blowtorch.

("The second starship is the *Siren.*")

Grandma Philonoe did not need to say more. Erik knew the *Siren* — a one-of-a-kind deep-space craft, fast and sleek, with a much more checkered history than the *Cape Colony* She had been refitted in Erik's home system, Fomalhaut B — back in Grandma Ada's time — for an unnamed Outback customer. Grandma Ada did not deal in names, just hard credit or salable cargo — so long as the goods weren't clearly stolen, or the credit crudely

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laundered. She was a firm believer in free trade.

("Still am, Grandson," Ada reminded him. "Ask no questions and you'll hear no lies.") Erik had nine grandmothers in his head, tucked in his 64K-megaRAM implant. Each old woman had once ruled a star system. Now most of them helped operate parts of Erik's augmented anatomy — external and internal sensors, extended memory, organic software.... All but Grandma Ada. Proud as Lucifer's aunt, Ada refused to be hardwired. She just floated about in his head, giving free advice in her strong soft voice. ("The *Siren*'s owner claimed to have 'holdings' in the Far Eridani, but he paid for the refit with a cargo of classy robotics — AI hardware, micro Waldos, semi-intelligent chassis. Stuff the family needed, but could not produce. Hell, the Far Eridani was more backward than Fomalhaut — *still is.* Lordy knows where the robotics really came from.")

"So you converted his high-G freighter into a fair copy of an Imp Armed Merchant Cruiser — minus the missiles and fire control." Seeing the *Siren* after so many centuries was like confronting the sins of his family. "Good work, Grandma Ada."

("Grandson, if a fellow wants his bulkheads armored and cargo space turned into boost capacity, who are we to judge? Maybe he lived in a rough neighborhood. The Navy thinks humans can police the Galaxy. Grandma Ada knows better.")

"Right, but what do we do now?"

(Ada laughed. "Why, you're gonna show 'em just what tough customers we are.") Easy enough for her. The old gal was an electronic ghost. Safe in his RAM. With no body to look out for, no pain receptors to bother her.

Dropping down from relativistic velocity, Erik had hours before he would be boarded. Connecting himself to the onboard systems, he sent Grandma Xantha (a wizardress with software) rampaging through the Skylark's computers, blanking vital memory, transferring programs into his head, infecting the hardware with a terminally nasty virus. Signals from the *Siren* ordered him into a prescribed orbit, threatening dire actions if he didn't answer and obey. Erik obeyed, but did not answer. Let the bastards sweat. They would not fire — not while he was hand delivering a luxury runabout. A Fornax Skylark is too valuable to blow up in a fit of pique.

Erik restocked his poisons, discarding those that had lost potency, renewing his own immunities. His best venoms had all gone bad, leaving him

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with nothing but slow toxins and an incapacitating fumigant — that was the best he could do, so far from the right sort of pharmacy. Holstering his stinger, he slid a pair of knives into his boot tops and hid a microgrenade behind his belt buckle. He constructed a tiny binary matter-antimatter bomb, concealing it beneath the Skylark's mass-converter. The bomb had a passive trigger, tuned to the transceiver in his skull. Ten hours after his brain stopped transmitting, the bomb would blast the ship to photons; by then whoever killed him would hopefully be aboard.

Having done his level best to prepare for guests, Erik ordered up cold *bouillabaisse* with Lyran bluefish, and a snifter of chilled Amontillado. He was going to miss the Skylark's whirlpool sauna and galley-bar. (The ship offered menus from five distinct cuisines: Fomalhaut Local, Imperial Standard, Sirian, Old Earth, and Mixed Provincial.) He would never have time to properly drain the wine locker. Erik had been born a planetary prince, accustomed to first-class comforts, the finest foods, the feel of silk, the snappiest orgies, designer pleasures served up by people in a frenzy to anticipate his wishes, fulfilling needs *before he even knew he had them.* Erik did not know what it was like to wait for service, suffer a credit check, or have a woman admit she was not in the mood — a life so high and refined it made the vacuum outside seem coarse. Yet he had come to like his leaner shipboard existence. Now that too would be taken from him.

He studied the blue planet below. White cloud swirls half-concealed a vast crescent-shaped continent, horns pointing northward, bathed by blue-green seas so clear and shallow Erik imagined he could see bottom. He might have lived there in solitary comfort, prince of a planet again. All the world lacked was a woman or three — the novel thrill of celibacy was wearing thin.

An alarm chimed. His lock cycled. Belly muscles tightened. Erik tossed down the contents of his sherry snifter; he would need a healthy dose of drunkard's luck to survive what was coming. Grandma Arrhippe helped his body relax. He tuned his 3V jacket to a neutral, non-reflective matte-gray.

Through the lock came the ugliest eight-legged xeno Erik had ever seen. Abdomen and thorax were protected by an armored carapace; a shiny helmet-like head sloped down over beady eyes and saber-shaped mandibles. Clawed forelimbs clutched a heavy assault gun, an anti-vehicle weapon able to punch through the outer bulkheads if the beetle was stupid enough to press the firing stud. Three similar monsters waddled through after the first, cycling in and

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fanning out with leveled guns and suspicious looks, braced for Erik to jump them. Behind this nightmare bug collection came a human, a wild young Eridani slaver, naked to the waist, with skin like teak. His bare chest crawled with lurid tattoos. Erik's implants included close-in sensors able to warn him if someone was armed — totally unnecessary in this case. Crossed bandoliers supported gas and fragmentation grenades, and a pair of riot pistols that fired salvos of self-propelled darts. Just for luck the pirate carried a wavy-bladed kris.

Erik watched glumly as the xenos stuck hideous heads into the lounge and sauna, sniffing at the Lyran bluefish. He had been mildly worried some bright lad would find his anti-matter bomb, but these boys acted like they would not know a bomb from *bouillabaisse* — not all non-humans were stupid, but eight legs and a mean disposition did not make you Albert Einstein either.

"Who the fuck be you?" The slaver spoke the raw, blunt version of Universal favored by Eridani badworlders.

"The name's mud," replied Erik, offering his stinger butt first. He had picked the absolute prize system to shelter in.

The pirate puzzled over the stinger, as though he did not believe something so delicate was a weapon, then he thrust it in his belt beside the kris. "Mud, you be prisoner." Things were progressing famously, less than a minute and they were on a first-name basis.

The slaver hustled Erik aboard a pinnace, squeezing him between another pair of overarmed xenos, whose grotesque spider-like bodies clashed with the pinnace's factory fresh interior. The hijackers had not bothered to scrape off the blue and white AID stickers — the Agency for Imperial Development subsidized Home Systems colonization. The pilot was semi-human — a wicked mercenary with a heavy assault pistol strapped to his thigh, wearing a tight gray tiger-striped uniform with ash white and charcoal black stripes. The Gray Tiger gave Erik a single glance — his pupils were quantum black holes, radiating the cold callousness that gave truly kill-crazy mercs a bad name.

Erik expected to be interrogated in the tight confines of the *Siren*, surrounded by Grandma Ada's handiwork. Instead he was shoved out onto a broad hangar deck, facing a circle of slavers and mercs primed for vicious amusement. ["Never seen this deck before, Grandson — got to be on the *Cape*

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Colony." Grandma Ada had a deck plan of the *Siren* in her files.)

He was immediately subjected to an unnecessarily intimate strip search. Slavers and Gray Tigers had a good gloat over his knives and microgrenade, which must have looked like kid's toys. Actually they were decoys. His real weapons were his implants and the poisons concealed in subcutaneous venom sacs. The knives and grenade gave searchers something to find, before they got frustrated and started taking him apart.

As they prodded and poked, Erik surveyed the spotless hangar deck. A large cargo lighter was opened up for repairs; smaller vessels arrived and departed through a yawning lock. A seemingly inexhaustible array of xenos serviced these craft — slim four-armed centauroids managed huge double-ended sixteen-legged centipedes. Bug warriors helped with the heavy work. The mercs, slavers, and their grotesque zoo made the white, spherical colony ship seem like a giant skull busily being picked clean. He saw no trace of the colonists the ship was built to carry. Erik had little love for Imp colonists — his family had always resisted taking them in. (By now he imagined Fomalhaut B was wide open to settlement.) Still, their absence was depressing — "You be prisoner" looked like a pause on the way to the organ banks. They finished up by fastening his hands behind him with thin filament plastic, cutting his circulation, and standing him stark naked in front of a tall slaver with a gravedigger's face. The man's features were decoratively menacing — a vivid white scar ran from forehead to chin, cutting through one eye, which was replaced by a functional but hideous mechanical implant. Erik whispered, "Grandma Ada, is this the guy you refitted the *Siren* for?"

("Never seen him. It's not a face your Grandma would forget.")

Aside from the scar, the slaver was a healthy specimen, trim and supple, wearing drop boots and ship trousers. A sash about his waist supported a recoilless pistol. Twin tattooed dragons curled around each nipple. (Philonoe informed Erik that dragons signified authority among Eridani slavers. "This Scaramouche is a ship's captain.")

"Okay, Captain Mud, give us your real name." Scaramouche did not have the Outback Eridani accent.

"I am Erik, Prince of Aquarius, heir to the House of Fomalhaut." This provoked laughter all around, coming from someone trussed and naked as a plucked turkey. "We refitted the *Siren* for you. You ought to be grateful."

"The former house of Fomalhaut. As for the refit, your family was paid

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in..." Scaramouche cocked his head; listening to a comlink in his ear. (Omphale traced the signal back to the *Siren.)* "...precision robotics. If you wanted eternal gratitude, it wasn't in the contract. Princes of Aquarius are ancient history — Tau Ceti has controlled Fomalhaut for over a century."

"If Imp control is so secure, why is there still a megacredit reward for me? Resistance is strong. My people want the House of Fomalhaut restored." Actually, Erik hadn't the foggiest idea how the Imps were doing on Fomalhaut; he just wanted to mention the megacredit reward.

"What are you doing so far from the fight?"

"I needed a rest."

The grinning apes got another good laugh, thoroughly enjoying themselves. Erik felt like he was doing stand-up comedy in a sadomasochistic nudist camp. Captain Scaramouche smiled — a really wicked sight. "More rest can be arranged." Another signal came from the *Siren.* (Omphale relayed it straight to Erik. *"Proceed to controlled interrogation.")*

Slavers grabbed Erik, frogmarching him to a hatch that opened into pitblackness so dark it looked like a hole in the hull. Only Erik's implants told him the chamber within had decks and bulkheads. They pushed him in. As the hatch clanged shut he heard a captor say, "Naked you came, and naked you go. May the Lord of Hosts have mercy." It seemed a damned odd thing for an Eridani slaver to say — ominous as all hell.

Moses said unto them. Kill every male Midianite, and every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man — but every woman child that has not known a man, keep her for yourselves...

—God's plan for the Midianites, Numbers 31:15-18

Lord of Hosts

PITCH BLACKNESS. The chamber must once have been refrigerated storage — walls and floor were frigid. Forced into the middle of the chamber, Erik used vasoconstriction to warm his body core. Implants turned off pain, shutting down fear, but nothing could hide how horribly wrong he had been. If he had picked any other uninhabited system to hide in — and there were

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hundreds in Sculptoris sector — his biggest worry would be bones in his bluefish.

("Naturally you picked the best star system," Ada adopted an I-told-you-so tone, "and an Earth-like gem of a planet — never thinking anyone else might want it. Now you are cold meat, held by half-human ghouls. This is a lesson, Grandson.")

(A chorus of voices agreed. "We warned you... Always expecting the best... Walk right in, take what you want.")

Erik admitted he was a spoiled fool, never appreciating the price of success, or the chance of failure. "Self-indulgence has caught up with me. You should be happy."

("But we only want the best for you. Really we do... Even Ada... Especially Ada....")

Darkness evaporated. He stood, hands free, under a hot sun, on a terraced hillside grazed by fat sheep. Bees buzzed about. Dusty air smelled of fennel, chicory, honey, and sheepdip. Vines, olives, and fruit trees grew on the surrounding slopes. A sandy arc of beach bordered a great blue bay. Above the beach was a walled palace with red marble columns, bronze gates, and tile roofs. Tiny half-wild antelope raided a melon patch.

He was home. Thin hot air, yellow dusty landscape, blue shallow sea — it was home, his home, Karka, the planet his family had terraformed. The small orange sun was Fomalhaut B. The palace was his mother's — just as it had been before the Imp Navy flattened it in a programmed display of firepower. He was near the East Court, by the spring and grotto sacred to the Goddess.

("Grandson, this is not home," Omphale broke into the simulation. "Sensors show this is coming from the *Siren*.")

"Screw your sensors, Grandma Omphale. I am enjoying it."

("Your hands are still bound and numb," Arrhippe added.) Erik looked down at his hands — free and in front of him, brown and sturdy in the sun.

("We can easily mask this.")

"Damn it, no. I'm enjoying it."

"ERIK OF FOMALHAUT." The voice came from behind him, in unaccented Universal, cold, implacable, unquestionably correct. Erik spun about. Standing behind him was an aged shepherd, a tall grandfatherly mountain of a man in a white robe, with a square-cut snowy beard and a

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craggy face. His eyes were a riveting wintery blue. Sheep flocked at his feet.

("It's him," Ada announced, "the one I fixed up the *Siren* for. Aging agrees with him. He has gotten a hell of a lot more impressive.")

"YOU STAND ON THE EDGE OF DESTRUCTION." Anyone else might have sounded silly saying this, knee-deep in sheep, but there was no denying that voice.

A hot sirocco whipped up the yellow dust, withering vines, stripping leaves from fruit trees. The ground shivered in the searing heat. Erik saw his mother's palace shake. Stones fell from the walls, columns buckled, porticoes collapsed. One by one the tile roofs fell in. It was like a fast forward replay of the orbital bombing.

"FEEL MY WRATH." The white-haired shepherd waved his crook, and the whole huge palace slid downhill toward the sea in an avalanche of dust and debris. Gold and bronze flowed like water. The sea itself seethed with unbelievable violence — in seconds the water was gone, boiled away, leaving a cracked and steaming bed. Lava welled up from the cracks. Not even orbital bombardment had been this bad. Stones smoked at Erik's feet. Only the old shepherd and his sheep remained on the lush green ground — lowering his crook, he reached out. "ERIK OF FOMALHAUT. YOU STAND BY THE BURNING PIT, BUT THE LORD OF HOSTS HAS USE FOR YOU."

Good news there, decided Erik, balancing on a thinning ridge of hot sand.

"THE LOCKS ON YOUR SHIP'S COMPUTER MUST BE REMOVED."

"Locks? Hardly." Erik summoned up a smile. "I gutted that ship. She won't move a millimeter without me." Not strictly true, but it was time to stake broad claims.

"YOU WILL REMOVE THE LOCKS."

"Can't be done," Erik retorted cheerfully. "That memory is destroyed. Gone for good."

"THEN THE FIRE SHALL CONSUME YOU." The old gaffer stood cool as ice atop his chunk of grass. Losing his footing on the fiery slope, Erik fell on all fours, burning his hands. He could tell the man before him was aboard the *Siren* — sensing the slight hesitation caused by speed-of-light lag — still it was gawdawful real. Hands and feet turned to seared stumps. Arrhippe blocked the pain, but not the horror he was seeing. "I won't burn alone," he promised. "That Skylark is in a decaying orbit. She'll fry when she hits atmosphere." Ghastly illusions could not suspend the laws of orbital

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mechanics.

"TO REJECT ME IS DEATH. FEEL THE WEIGHT OF YOUR FLESH."

Erik's body withered, skin wrinkling, hair coming out in clumps; his teeth started to wiggle and fall from his head.

"ACCEPT MY COVENANT AND YOU MAY HAVE LIFE EVERLASTING."

"I accept. I accept," croaked Erik, spitting teeth.

("Still enjoying this?" Ada was getting some of her own back.) Erik gritted his gums, too busy groveling to argue.

"I HAVE COLLECTED THE VERY DREGS. THE SCUM OF CREATION." If Scaramouche and his happy slavers were a decent sample, dregs and scum was outrageous flattery.

"REPENT, ERIK OF FOMALHAUT, AND YOU TOO MAY BE SAVED."

Erik repented furiously, renouncing every sin he had committed or hoped to commit.

A searing flash, a ripple of thunder, and Karka was restored. Erik was back standing on the sunny slope beneath his mother's citadel. A breeze blew in off the sea. The spring bubbled by the grotto. Hands and feet were whole. No charred bones. No third degree burns. His new master's voice boomed about him, warning that covenant breakers were cast into black pits, shackled to corpses, covered with boils, and like pleasantries. The man was seriously insane, a megalomaniac of no mean proportions. Erik had been raised as a demi-god himself, and knew the symptoms.

The thunder and theatrics ended. Erik was back in the black hold. Hands tied. Naked he had entered and naked he emerged. A grinning pair of slavers undogged the hatch. One of them stepped forward with a wavy blade — a sinister greeting for a fellow covenanter. The villain merely spun Erik about, using the kris to cut the plastic binding his hands. He was the same brown-skinned slaver who had boarded the Skylark.

Erik's freed hands were numb as ice — no illusion there. Slavers had to dress him, working under the baleful mechanical eye of Captain Scaramouche. There were no hosannas or hallelujahs for the new convert — no tearful rounds of "O He Has Come to Us." Erik doubted these cutthroats took religion all that seriously. Certainly they must distrust him as much as he distrusted them.

Feeling returned to his hands. He warmed them in the pockets of his 3V

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jacket, amazed to find nothing stolen. Everything was there: his player-recorder; a 48K-megabyte computer pad, compatible with his internal RAM; also his medikit, silk handkerchiefs, several patently false IDs, and a near priceless black-jade butterfly. Strange, a crew of murderers with scruples against petty theft. Their loss — it was all going to be used against them.

Scaramouche gave him a gruff welcome. "Consider yourself crew. Work hard, collect your tattoos, in a few years you could have a dragon on your left tit. Get out of line, and I'll flay you with a dull knife." This inspiring speech drew grins from the Gray Tigers. "Mikilu." Scaramouche nodded to the slaver with the kris. "Get him a bunk. Bring him back with the morning watch to work on the Skylark."

Mikilu touched the kris to his lips, saluting with an over-elaborate flourish — the single dragon on his chest meant he was a felon on his way up. He led Erik off through the ship's corridors, saying, "Slaving be the life. You'll see — better than hot cargoes, hijacking, or murder-for-hire." Corrupt grammar could not hide amused indulgence. Mikilu was the lordly initiate, totally at ease with saber-jawed xenos, heavy weapons, and torturous interrogation. Prince Erik was the bumbling novice. "Imps ruined the Eridani, shut down the slave marts, took the living out of smuggling — cargoes all be legal now, or be too easy to trace." Erik politely agreed. Imps had ruined him too. It hardly paid to be a planetary prince anymore — if it weren't for pride and perks his family would never have put up a fight.

Bug warriors lined the bulkheads, being fed by the big double-ended sixteen-leggers. There were four-armed centauroids in the corridors too, acting quick and efficient. Erik asked Grandma Philonoe where all these strange xenos could come from. ("Don't know, Grandson." There was unaccustomed amazement in her voice. "Centauroids? Two-headed centipedes? A dozen different bug warriors? So many unrecorded species of intelligent oxy-breathing xenos is astonishing, even this deep in the Outback.") Unsettled did not mean unexplored. Survey ships had visited every system for hundreds of parsecs. Had several inhabited oxygen-rich worlds been somehow overlooked? Impossible. Erik considered asking the talkative Mikilu, but did not want to seem overcurious — there were better, surer ways than asking.

They exited the central drop shaft at an open berth deck, rows of cubicles, sprinkled with slavers. Gray Tigers must have their own deck. Mikilu

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indicated a space with twin bunks, lockers, recyclers, and a pair of ship's tables.

"Which berth?" Erik noted the absence of sauna and auto-bar, and doubted that the cuisine would be even four star.

"Take both, there be space to spare."

His new lockers were stuffed with useful odds and ends: 3V spools, neatly folded coveralls, a holo-cam and recorder — cheap and shiny Home Systems exports. Also a flask of cognac, bottled in Tau Ceti, Imperial Brandy, the real stuff — better than two hundred years old. Noting the seal was broken, Erik hefted the flask. Almost full. He stiffened, staring at the array of cubicles, listening to Mikilu banter with a couple of other hard cases.

"Soft detail. Gonna show him R deck?"

"That be next."

Erik thought about the fellow who had neatly folded his spare coveralls, then took a last nip of brandy...before going where? He put down the bottle as though it were contaminated. Cubicles were crammed with personal effects. This deck alone had held over a thousand colonists — now it was occupied by a couple dozen slavers, ghouls living free and easy in an empty tomb.

"Come on." Mikilu got up. "The best be ahead."

"The best be here." A lithe young slaver winked.

"Fucking faggot," a third called out.

Stunned, Erik let Mikilu steer him back into the drop shaft. Centauroids hurried between levels. Gray Tigers got off at their deck. But Erik dropped past deck after deck, open and unguarded, unused by anyone. Only R deck had a guard, a Gray Tiger lounging at the hatch — a blond handsome barbarian, with smooth features and oiled love locks. He gave Mikilu the same smirk Erik had seen at each mention of R deck. "Welcome to paradise." He pulled up the hatch lever, motioning them into a stripped-down lock smelling of stale air and solvent.

A biblical passage translated into Universal hologlyphs floated before the inner pressure door:

When the Lord delivers the enemy into your hands, if you see a comely virgin among the captives, you may marry her. Bring her to your house, shave her head, pare her nails, and discard the clothes she wore. She shall

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stay in your house a full month, mourning her father and mother. Then you may have intercourse with her.

—Deuteronomy 21:10-14

Mikilu stepped through the letters, opening the inner hatch. Beyond was a berth deck filled with cubicles — and women. Women and girls everywhere. Crowded three and four to a cubicle, sitting in the corridors, alone, or in groups. Young mothers nursed babies. Little girls played. Teenagers hung out. They all wore white shifts, and their heads had been shaved. The hair growing back was so short and even, Erik could tell they had all been bald a few weeks ago.

The two men were greeted with silence, broken only by babies crying. Erik saw a painful progression of expressions. Small girls smiled at him. Older sisters gave him shy looks. Teenage girls bit their nails. Young women scowled, or wore blank stares. And there it stopped. There were no older women. Biosculpt can make a woman's age hard to guess at, especially in a shapeless smock with most of her hair shaved off — but none of the women Erik saw were past childbearing. Here were the colonists. But he was seeing a badly skewed segment; a single sex — cut off before midlife.

Mikilu took sugar crystals from a flap in his trousers, handing them out to the small girls gathered around the lock entrance. He smiled at Erik. "Giving sweets to little girls be an investment in the future."

A teenager wearing a bright kerchief took some sugar, but said what she actually needed was a holocam. She *really* wanted one. Mikilu laughed. "Not today, honey." He handed her a couple of 3V spools. She thanked him with a broad smile. Erik felt guilty for having full pockets, when these women had nothing, not even pockets. His bunk, the personal effects in his locker, the three-star food waiting for him, had all been meant for these women and their families. In short order he gave away his silk handkerchiefs and his player-recorder, leaving him with just his comp-pad, medikit, false IDs, and black jade butterfly. In return he got thanks, smiles, and a sense of relief.

Some were not so easily pleased. A stern-faced woman confronted Erik. "What we really need is blankets."

"And a change of clothes," added her companion.

"A way to fix proper meals."

"We can't even boil water."

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"Or mend our smocks."

Erik noted that Mikilu's easy smile never faltered. He had a trick of looking through a woman, fixing his gaze on her breasts or crotch, plainly enjoying himself until she gave up. A young woman pushed her way forward. She wore no handkerchief, nothing but her smock, but her presence was striking — strong fine facial bones showed beneath a short pelt of blonde hair. Smoldering blue-gray eyes stared straight at Mikilu. "What has happened to the others? That is what we really need — to know about the others."

Women were emboldened by her attitude: "Tell us what has happened to the men."

"Where is my husband?"

"My little boy?"

Mikilu looked her up and down, studying the curves under her smock, but not meeting her eyes. She gave a snort, turning her frank unwavering gaze on Erik. "What about you? My name is Lilith Glauschreiber. My parents are Jacob Schreiber and Sarah Glaus. She is an optic surgeon, my father chaired the Department of Urban Affairs on Tau Ceti IV. What has happened to them?"

Erik hid his embarrassment behind lame formality. "I am Erik, Prince of Fomalhaut." Clearly his name and title meant nothing to her — Imp colonists were notoriously ignorant, and there was no reason why a young woman headed for a new life in the Kaitos should be familiar with Fomalhaut. He hastened to absolve himself. "I have just come aboard this ship. I know only that this is the *Cape Colony*, and that you were headed for the Deneb Kaitos. You have been missing for some time." More than a century, but he did not say that. Relativistic travel made Home System dates meaningless in the Outback.

"This is not the Deneb Kaitos." Her eyes widened.

So they did not even know that — every word would be a blow. "We are deep in Sculptoris Sector. You are about forty-five degrees off your original course, and you have overshot the Kaitos by more than fifty light-years." (Philonoe offered exact figures, but he ignored her.) Gasps and wailing greeted the news. The women were a long way from any conceivable rescue.

Lilith frowned. "You must have seen other parts of the ship. We have seen nothing but this deck for weeks."

Erik admitted he had seen something of the ship — a hangar deck, a berth

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deck, the drop shaft and a dark storage locker.

"Are there men or older women on other decks?"

"I saw no other colonists."

She gave her head a dismissive shake. They both knew he was weaseling. What he had not seen was damning. Total absence implied total elimination. But what was he to say — that their fathers and mothers, husbands, brothers, and sons were most likely murdered? Erik doubted he would have the nerve, even if he knew it to be true.

Mikilu led him back through the lock, saying, "You learn. Answering questions be a mistake. They stop asking, then there be some nice talk-talk. But just talk-talk. The boss be a very religious fellow." Erik was familiar with that phenomenon — a mass murderer opposed to indiscriminate sex. Erik had found he could usually tolerate indiscriminate sex; it was mass killing that made him queasy.

"Soon we be taking them dirtside," Mikilu added. "For get acquainted trips. Then we marry one, two, maybe three. Women to spare. Plenty fuck-fuck."

"What did happen to the others?" Erik could not stand saying nothing. Besides, asking no questions was as suspicious as asking too many.

Mikilu nodded to the Gray Tiger on guard. "Show the man your arms." The merc was not taking his duty too seriously, so deep in the bowels of a heavily armed ship. He rolled back his tiger-striped sleeves.

Mikilu explained idly, "When we take this ship, the Imps put up a fuss. Bugs led the storming parties, doing the fighting and dying. But this tiger here, he be a hero. A real shit-wit. Stops a laser burst with his bare hand."

Erik could see the merc's arms did not match. It was not a sloppy job, but one arm was bigger, darker.

"His arm be burnt to the elbow. But now it be brand new."

"New to me anyway." The merc rolled down his sleeves.

"Plenty women. Plenty spare parts. It be the life."

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We went into the land to which you sent us. It does indeed flow with milk and honey...

—Numbers 13:28

Promised Land

MORNING WATCH. Back aboard the Skylark, Erik pretended to fix computers. Scaramouche stomped about, tossing sarcastic comments to Mikilu, knowing there was nothing much wrong with the ship's electronics — hardware would "get well" at a command from Erik. All the while, an animated debate raged inside Erik's head:

("What do we know?" demanded Xantha. At core a programmer, Xantha needed all data properly filed.)

(Philonoe ticked off facts for her. "Ada's old customer thinks he's a god. He's gathered some Gray Tigers, Eridani slavers, and a horde of unknown xenos. They hijacked a colony ship, exterminating the crew and male colonists...")

Are they really all dead? Erik wondered.

("Harden up, Grandson. They're as dead as we are. Maybe more.")

But why? Erik still felt like a kid, always asking them, but why? Why hijack the *Cape Colony*? Why come here?

("To establish a settlement." Xantha tried to tie it all together in a single logic loop.)

("Why does a slaver get religion and turn settler?" Ada picked at the dangling threads. "And where did all the xenos come from?"

("From the Beyond," suggested Semiramis, the family poetess, forever fascinated by the great galaxy beyond Human Space — where anything was possible.)

("Impossible," Philonoe and Xantha insisted. "The *Siren* left Fomalhaut with no bugs aboard. She hadn't time to reach the Fringes and return. These xenos came from Human Space.")

("Equally impossible," snorted Semiramis. "Worlds with oxygen-breathing xenos shine like bare behinds.") Most of Human Space was a dismal waste. Really habitable worlds were so rare the Imps fought a war just to open Fomalhaut to settlement.

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{"Two mysteries equal a solution." An old Ada aphorism. "Find out where the xenos came from — or why he's settling here — then everything will come together."}

"I don't think you are doing a damned thing." Scaramouche shouted the words into Erik's ear, leaning hard on his shoulder. "This is all a sad fucking show."

Erik sighed, setting down the superconducting probe he'd been faking repairs with. "You're right. This hardware will stand up and whistle when I want it to."

Scaramouche jerked upright, a look of flabbergasted triumph on his face. "I'll see you skinned, a centimeter at a time."

Erik shook his head. "Kill me and you lose this ship." He had to offer up the Skylark, but if he surrendered the ship too easily, they'd know he was not giving up real control. {"That's it, Grandson — make demands. Get them to give, or they won't fall." Shut up, Ada, I'm handling this.} Erik knew what he wanted in return for the Skylark, something semi-innocent, but crucial.

"Who said kill?" Scaramouche got his wicked grin back.

"Torture won't work. Drugs won't. I want a woman — and a trip dirtside." Erik jabbed a finger at Mikilu. "He said we could take women dirtside, to get acquainted. That sounded good." In fact it was the best thing he'd heard since coming insystem.

Scaramouche stared open-mouthed at Mikilu, then back at Erik. Before Scaramouche could say more, Erik picked up the thin glittering probe he had pretended to do repairs with. Opening his hand, he stabbed the needle-sharp instrument right through his palm. {"Arrhippe, take away the pain."} With a proud smile, he held his palm up, showing the slavers. "No blood. No pain. I don't feel torture."

Mikilu shook his head. "Man, you be crazy."

Scaramouche spit and swore delightfully. "We'll take you apart piece by piece, eyes last, so you can *watch*."

"That won't get you the Skylark. Ask the old guy aboard the *Siren*. One woman — one drop dirtside." Erik turned his hand about, admiring the way the metal went through. They needed the Skylark; otherwise he'd have gone under the scalpel long ago — he'd be part of some slaver with weak kidneys or a gimpy liver.

Scaramouche stopped sputtering. He was listening on his comlink.

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(Omphale monitored the link to *Siren*. "You got them on the run, Grandson.")

"Her name is Lilith." Erik drew out the steel sliver. Arrhippe closed his flesh behind it. "The daughter of Jacob Schreiber and Sarah Glaus, late of Tau Ceti IV." Philonoe made sure he never forgot a name or place.

Scaramouche grunted. "This damn ship better hum." He stalked off.

Mikilu grimaced. "Man, you be crazy."

Erik shrugged. "I wanted the woman and the drop dirtside. Didn't mean to make any enemies."

Mikilu laughed. "You make no enemies. Captain, he already want you be dead. But you really be mad, risking your balls for some bad attitude blonde. She be real grief. Got a mean mouth on her. You gonna be wishing you be butt-fucking the Captain."

Erik acknowledged the possibility. "Why does he want me dead?"

"He think you be dicking us." Mikilu let his gaze bore into Erik, the same look he used on the women. "He think you be having a bad attitude. He think you be having plans."

When there was a lighter waiting, with Lilith aboard, the Skylark got well. (Philonoe informed him, "You cut that last scene very close. Push harder, and they will kill you.")

("Too many loose variables," declared Xantha.)

("I liked it," chuckled Ada.)

Erik shrugged. He had to see the planet. And Lilith. He had played hard for this chance, risking offhand execution and trading away his biggest trump — temporary control of the Skylark. He was not primed to waste the drop, or the time with Lilith. He had to squeeze information and opportunity out of every nanosecond. Scaramouche was not making it easy. Four big bugs dropped with Erik — these had combed skulls, and sleek armor with slim limb greaves, lightly built, for shipboard skirmishing or tunnel work. Otherwise they resembled the heavier types, eight limbs, tiny eyes, antennae. Noiseless too. They must use the antennae for communication.

("Weak electromagnetic signaling," Omphale informed him. "Recognition codes. Command phrases. Nothing fancy or philosophical.") He told her to have Xantha and Philonoe break the encryption. He wanted to hear what the bugs had to say, maybe even talk back.

He got a look at the planet as they spiraled in. Passing over nightside,

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heading for the terminator, he saw an ocean dimly lit by a trio of moons. Day broke, a brilliant blue band, becoming brighter, bluer. The sun itself appeared over the dark limb of the planet, not Sol but a near sister, red at the horizon, climbing, becoming a yellow-white orb. Then came the soft thump of retros. G forces built up. The lighter was a simple scramjet, oxy-hydrogen engines, no acceleration fields — low tech. Stars faded. The sky turned blue. Contrails snaked off the wings. The pilot was one of the slim four-armed, four-legged centauroids, sitting on its haunches. With four arms he could pilot and copilot at the same time. Some smart xeno, but silent as the bug warriors.

Beside him was Lilith, wearing a dark fabric dropsuit that fitted her better than the smock — grace, firmness, and strength showed through. She too was silent as a bug warrior. Active gray-blue eyes checked on him, the armed xenos, the centauroid at the controls — everyone got bold intelligent glances.

Erik found he enjoyed having her look at him. "Continent coming up." He nodded toward a port. The crescent landmass looked like a green-brown sickle, cutting between the sea and sky.

Lilith turned sideways, head pressed into the seat by acceleration, looking out the port, and at him. "What do you know about this planet?" She was pumping him. ("Always thinking," Ada noted with approval.) Did she have plans too?

"A beaut." Erik breathed out, relaxing into the gee forces. "Oxygen atmosphere. Heavy on the CO_2. Lots of greenhouse. Flora and fauna. Even megafauna." Probably better than the world she'd been headed for in the Kaitos — small consolation, considering what it cost Lilith to get here. Mikilu sat behind them, making sure talk-talk did not lead to fuck-fuck. As if four bug warriors weren't chaperones enough.

The scramjet set down on a strip still being hacked out of highland forest. Green genesis spread endlessly in all directions, scaly tubular trees with frond-like tops, dripping with vines and creepers. Centauroids were busily extending the field with chain saws and satchel charges. Monocloni, rhino-sized ceratopsians, cleared stumps and hauled timber. Such single-horned retrobred reptiles were the standard heavy movers in new settlements — warmblooded egglayers, handier and easier to breed than elephants. Erik took Lilith for a walk along the composting edge of the strip. Mikilu followed, making sure her coveralls stayed zipped. Four bug-warriors rounded out the

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group.

"Conversation is pointless," she informed him.

Erik admitted conditions were not perfect. "But this is a get-acquainted trip."

"Right." She hugged herself, shuddering despite the heat. "They explained the whole nauseating charade. We are to be kept like white mice in a box, doled as prizes for men's good behavior. The notion of marrying one of you is putrid."

As Prince of Aquarius, Erik was accustomed to having women seek him out at galas and parties, primed to share the royal bed. Despite his inexperience with flirtation, he could tell this was a poor start. "But I would like to get to know you." He gestured at the strip, the strange creatures, the upland forest. "Is this what you emigrated for? A new world. A virgin planet."

Blue-gray eyes blazed. "I came to be with my parents."

"Then tell me about them," he replied softly.

Tears welled up. "They are wonderful. Kind, thoughtful, terribly in love, always busy with life. They had distinguished careers, and time for only one child. When I turned eighteen they decided to retire and emigrate. I know they hated the notion of losing me. In a small settlement we could always be close. It was a new beginning, a sort of second childhood. And now this..." Her words trailed off.

"What exactly happened?" Erik needed details, and also to remind her that he had taken no part in the hijacking.

She stared at piles of cut vegetation, rotting in the heat, fed on by scaly segmented creatures. "We were past turnaround, decelerating toward Deneb Kaitos." The *Cape Colony* was no slowboat — gravity drive and acceleration fields shortened multiparsec voyages into a few weeks, ship-time. "Word came to keep to our stateroom. I did not know we were boarded until men in tiger suits forced the door, lining us up at gunpoint and searching the suite. As they left they took me." She turned to him. "My parents were terrified, *for me.* My last memory is my mother begging the men in tiger suits to have pity and not hurt *me.*" She shivered again. "All they did was drag me to a berth deck packed with young women. Second and third class colonists mostly. They stripped me. Shaved me. Even pared my goddamn nails. Also lectured us on religion. Weird, but tolerable, especially when you are expecting to be raped and murdered. Of course I can still look forward to

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that," she added evenly.

Lilith looked him over, using her frank, open gaze like a lie detector. "You had nothing to do with that? You know nothing about my parents?"

"No, nothing." He could not bring himself to say this loving pair had been chopped up for parts. "But I understand some of your sadness. My own parents were murdered. I suspect your parents are dead, but I *know* mine are." Lilith stared, saying nothing. They walked back. Between footfalls, Erik heard the faint roar of rapids, and the rush of a jungle river.

(Ada announced, "Xantha thinks your chances with this woman are statistically absurd.") He reminded Ada that Xantha had been out of circulation for centuries.

(Ada laughed. "Xantha was never *in* circulation.") Xantha was Ada's daughter, as restrained and logical as Ada was wild and flamboyant. Such contrasting personalities were utterly predictable — Ada was a mother you had to rebel against, or always live in her shadow. Lilith was like neither of them. A woman all her own, and then some, tough, articulate, and undeniably attractive — even in shorn hair and overalls. Mikilu was right; she had a bad mouth and a bad attitude. But Erik needed that. A woman ready to fold up would be worthless against Eridani slavers and Gray Tigers. And there was a raw novelty in knowing a handsome woman who did not give a thin damn that he was Prince of Aquarius.

The planet had long fifty-hour days. Erik told Mikilu the logging camp was tedious — he did not want to spend his shore leave pacing out the landing strip. Mikilu arranged a ride on one of the log rafts down to Prairie Station, getting a wicked delight out of watching Erik go nowhere with Lilith. The raft was a flat series of floats, a huge segmented snake drawn by a tiny ATV tug. As they set out, Xantha reported rapid progress on breaking down the bug warriors' coded signals. ("Simple binary communications, not meant for secrecy — I'll have you speaking it like a spider. We could use a closer look at their antennas, and whatever receptors are hidden under those headpieces.") Sure, Grandma.

Twisted green creeks drained the cloud-topped uplands. Banks lined with triple-canopy forest slid by. Erik was sitting on the log raft, wondering how he was going to take one of the bug warriors apart, when Lilith came up, saying, "You heard my story. I should listen to yours." For the first time since R-deck, she had initiated a conversation, actually seeming curious about

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him.

He did not tell her everything — merely the high spots — world class chefs preparing his snacks, champion athletes helping him train, a whole university dedicated to his education. He could see her both fascinated and repelled. An upper-class girl from Tau Ceti IV had to respect wealth and privilege, no matter how democratic the Home Systems pretended to be. "This pleasant monotony came to a crashing end when your Navy blasted my mother's palace, strewing bodies about the formal gardens. Marines followed, shooting everything that smelled of resistance. Bodyguards deserted. Mother and Father died fighting. I fled in a stolen ship."

"But why?" She was half shocked, half disbelieving.

"Someone had to run; might as well be me — I was saving the family archives." Nine quarrelsome grandmothers, but he did not tell her that. Not yet.

"I mean, why did the Navy attack?" Lilith looked genuinely puzzled.

"My family refused to open Fomalhaut to colonization."

"Free trade and travel are natural rights." The well-schooled answer.

"Nonsense. Free trade and travel are for people who own starships. Everyone else pays." One way or another.

Lilith thought it over. Erik watched the banks broaden and flatten out. Forest thinned, showing patches of spiky desert plants. "I've visited the Outer systems," he told her, "and seen religious tyranny, grinding poverty, sexual oppression, all protected by the Navy's 'non-interference.'"

"Not everyone is ready for Imperial Democracy."

"Not everyone wants it." He tried to match her frank openness. "Fomalhaut never attacked Tau Ceti. Whatever the sins of my family, our real crime was not taking your cheap goods and surplus people."

"I'm sorry." It was an automatic apology for a war she had never heard of until now.

"Not your fault. But you need to know you are not the only victim." He could see Lilith liked her galaxy in black and white.

("Good going, Grandson. You'll have her sending protests home to her Senator.") He told Ada to butt out.

Lilith took his hand, suddenly tender. "I am sorry. For you." Mikilu swaggered up, shaking his head at physical contact. Lilith only glared at the slaver, squeezing tighter.

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Thank you, Mikilu, thought Erik — he squeezed back, then let his hand drop. "Just don't keep trying to be an innocent bystander. There is no such thing." He nodded toward Mikilu.

"Not in this universe," agreed the slaver. "And if there be, they don't be long."

At Prairie Station, more monocloni hauled the logs ashore. A stockade was taking shape, along with a sawmill and corrals. Superchimps sweated in the sun, extending irrigation canals full of oily brown runoff. Settlement was going full out, with every sign of being permanent — Erik still did not know why. Ada continued to insist there must be a *reason* why the slavers were settling here — something worth coming all this way. So far the only treasure Erik had seen was the planet itself, warm and verdant, a new Earth — but not special enough to turn Gray Tigers into farmers.

Dirty-white camels waited to carry them on a short tour of the flats. The camels were *Camelops hesternus,* a previously extinct species, retrobred from living relatives — hefty as a bactrian, but single-humped, longer-legged, stronger and faster. Everything was relentlessly organic and low tech. The more a colony could produce on its own, the better its chances were.

Lilith knew all about camels, having trained with them, preparing for the Kaitos. A liking of animals and willingness to work were sides to her Erik had not expected. Her eagerness to sweat was endearing, something a prince could appreciate, if not share. She patted kneepads. Checked pack saddles and nose pegs. "Nice lot," she declared, "alert, responsible looking. Not too cheeky. Don't let that fool you." She grinned at Erik. "Camels are intelligent, sensitive creatures, and have every reason to resent being tied up and ridden. Remember that. These are mind-blocked so they can't actually bite your head off. But if you treat them like hairy ATVs, they'll find a way to kill you." To Erik they just looked like camels, coyly aloof perhaps, but mostly indifferent.

She helped him mount. Mikilu's beast was being playfully stubborn, and for a moment they were utterly alone. Her voice dropped an octave, becoming quiet and concerned. "I can see you've been hurt, but it does not justify joining them." She nodded toward Mikilu and the bug warriors.

Erik nearly despaired. Why was she so obtuse? It had to be the superficial polish of Home System breeding — the best schools, the best clubs, the best bullshit. Scaramouche had seen through his scamming, but she couldn't.

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"I'm here for the same reason you are," he whispered. "They threatened the hell out of me, and I did not want to die just to prove a point."

Lilith gave him a puzzled, apologetic glance, then mounted her own camel.

("I like her," Ada concluded.) You would, thought Erik.

Weighted down with water, rations, macroscopes, maps, inertial-compasses, polarizers, bush knives, and turbans, they set out, eager to see the local megafauna, which vaguely resembled early Triassic thecadonts, high-metabolic reptiles — only they were much larger, marsupial, herbivorous, multi-eyed, and twelve-legged. Landscape was all red rock and dune, cut by short spurs and low escarpments. Alkali dust hung in the air, leached from the soil by acid rain and greenhouse gases. The tough, spiky greenery was a little like skinny cactus — though clearly not a flowering plant. Up close it resembled nothing Erik had ever seen. But you don't go a hundred light-years expecting to find gardenias.

An hour out, he saw the first large fauna, a pack of biped predators, bigger than camels, with crested heads, armless bodies and heavy slashing beaks. They had eight eyes, two huge ones above the beak for binocular vision, and a half-dozen smaller ones ringing their necks. Obviously hunters, but with no reason to fear or feed on humans.

Mikilu had them follow the bipeds, hoping the predators were stalking even larger herbivores. No luck.

Heading back to Prairie Station, Erik noted a tall cloud of red dust, billowing up behind a ridge, looking like a sandstorm. Mikilu picked up the pace. The station was upwind, so Erik saw no chance of them actually being caught by the storm. But the cloud got closer, moving crosswind. Impossible, yet it was happening. Ahead of the cloud came a deep rumbling echo, growing louder, a sustained quake, drowning out the padded clop of the camels. The xenos were walking, and must have felt the tremors from toes to antenna. Erik saw them fan out into skirmish formation, facing the ridge.

The rumbling became a roar. An enormous body flew over the crest of the ridge. Thirty meters long, the land whale massed maybe a hundred tons. It had great mowing jaws, and ran high off the ground, half running, half flying on twelve pumping legs. Followed by another. Then a whole herd.

Erik froze. His camel bawled in terror.

Bug warriors stood their ground, firing shaped charges at the oncoming

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behemoths — brave but idiotic. Charges knocked off legs and shattered jaws, but could not stop the stampeding monsters. They bowled over the skirmish line, tossing xenos every which way.

Mikilu screamed into the comlink — issuing a hysterical barrage of oath and orders. Erik paid no attention. Remembering Lilith's advice, he let his camel have her head. The beast bellowed, shit twice, and took off.

Atop a terrified camel, Erik raced right between two stampeding mountains. He glimpsed huge backs, flashing limbs, and tremendous heads, an avalanche of flesh with clusters of tiny eyes. They vanished at a record clip, raising clouds of dust and dirt. But his camel was not going to stop. Frightened out of her mind-block, she went bellowing in circles, trying to buck him, smashing into sharp vegetation, frantic to scrape off her pack saddle and flee even faster.

Lilith saved him. Bursting out of a side draw, her camel completely under control, she grabbed his mount's nose-line, dragging the astonished beast to a halt. Helping Erik dismount, she was all over him, asking how he felt, seeing if he was hurt.

Head spinning, chest heaving, turban unraveled, he looked around. They were alone. Absolutely alone, apart from a pair of thoroughly shaken camels. "Are you with me?" he demanded. "Will you help me get free?"

"With you? Free?" Lilith peered at him, checking to see whether he'd been banged on the head by the lunatic camel.

"Yes. Free from these slavers and Gray Tigers."

"You mean you have not joined them?"

"Not for a nanosecond." He was finally getting through, seeing doubt, disbelief, and a trace of hope in her eyes. "I mean to beat them. Will you help?"

"Of course. But how? They have ships, an arsenal, an army of xenos..."

"Start by helping me get to one of those squashed bugs."

Lilith nodded, abruptly all business — helping him mount double on her camel, dragging his own distraught beast by the nose-line. She knew just how far she had come, and in what direction. Marvelous woman, Erik admitted. (Ada smugly agreed.)

Ruddy alkali dust covered the ridge. Erik dismounted, pulling up the hood on his 3V jacket, tuning it to match the red dust and rock. Lilith blinked as his upper half vanished. No time to explain. He raced over to the nearest

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dead xeno. No sign of Mikilu, or the pack camels. But a number of bug warriors were alive and alert, finishing off a huge herbivore thrashing about by the base of the ridge.

Working rapidly, he drew his bush knife and hacked at the dead xeno's antenna, stuffing it under his jacket for further study. He needed to look for receptors beneath the skull helmet. Dust was settling. Conditions weren't ideal for dissection, but he had to make the most of the moment. Thankfully the smashed bug did not stink. Or twitch. He pried at the broken headpiece, slashing through connective tissue, widening the break made by some thoughtless clawed foot. Then he planted his own foot on the xeno's neck, and gave a great ripping jerk.

The helmet came half off in his hand. Erik stood for a second in profound shock, then replaced the helmet, racing back to rejoin Lilith and the camels. He had seen plenty. The face beneath the helmet was unmistakable — inside the hulking bug warrior armor was the body of a slim energetic centauroid.

They brought the Ark of the Covenant unto His place, the oracle of His house, the holy of holies...

—Kings I 8:6

Holy of Holies

("ALL THE *same* species." Ada sounded triumphant.)

("Even the double-ended sixteen-leggers?")

("Sure." Semiramis chuckled. "Stick two eight-leggers together. Artful...but what does it mean?")

("When I finish cracking the language, I'll tell you." Ada had taken over the decoding. Xantha had bigger things to tackle.)

Erik returned looking like the model prisoner-recruit. He had not run off during the stampede, but had come dutifully back, bringing Lilith with him — without so much as a fuck-fuck. The Skylark continued to be obedient. He was trustee material, and someone aboard the *Siren* liked him. Included in Erik's reward was a visit to R-deck. Mikilu did not get to go — his sightseeing had resulted in squashed bugs and stampeded camels. Erik was paired with a taciturn Gray Tiger, a veteran trooper who hardly spoke two

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words.

The same curious crowd gathered at the inner hatch — boredom on R-deck must be monumental. Women stood about just to see and talk to their jailors. Lilith arrived flanked by two outgoing teenagers in gay kerchiefs, wearing earrings fashioned from circuit components. They proceeded to find the silent Gray Tiger irresistible. In the course of a lively duet the pair let it slip that they shared a cubicle. Would their new acquaintance like to see it? The Gray Tiger gave Erik a look that said, "If you won't tell, I won't," then disappeared.

"Come." Lilith tilted her head. "I will show you a place where we can be alone." He followed two steps behind her. Her swinging hips had a provocative sureness that Erik found enticing, though he was used to more deference. He wondered idly if all Home System women were so difficult.

She showed him to a bare cubicle with a single cot. Seeing no other furniture, he sat down on the head of the cot. "Is this your cubicle?"

"Oh no." Lilith laughed, sitting down next to him. "It is held empty. We take turns using it, to have bits of privacy. It's called the Fuck Cubicle." She mixed shyness with defiance, as if she hoped to shock.

"Really?" Erik expressed surprise that the women were so ready to be intimate with the mercs and slavers.

She gave him a sideways look. "You would be astonished by what goes on. By what I have seen."

"Like your two friends?"

"Oh, that's just private enterprise. The Tiger will have to pay if he wants to get anywhere. Those two run a brisk business out of their cubicle. Cash and barter. They won't do it for less than a holocam — more if you want both." She patted the cot. "Here it is not all whoring. And not always with men. Whoever needs privacy signs up. We've learned not to be fussy."

("How private is it?" he asked Omphale.)

("The usual sensors, watched over by some pretty dumb software. Nothing we can't mask.")

("You won't have to perform in front of an audience," Ada added.) Business first. He emptied his pockets, found the computer pad and offered it to Lilith. "Do you know what this is?"

"A compad. Maybe 48K-megabyte."

"Right." She was sharp. "It contains something similar to a computer

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virus — extremely potent." It was difficult to explain Grandma Xantha to someone outside the family.

She looked skeptical.

"All you need do is plug it into a terminal jack." R-deck had the usual jacks for tapping into the *Cape Colony's* compnet.

"Why me? You could do it as easily."

"I'm closely watched. And once we get going this ship will erupt. I can't be tied to a terminal jack." She nodded and accepted the pad, closing her fingers around Xantha.

"At the right instant this virus will seize control of the ship's automatic systems. You women will have to overpower any mercs or slavers visiting R-deck. The virus will help you secure the locks and take over the ship."

"Is that possible?"

"Very. But it is not the hardest thing we have to do. There is the Skylark and the *Siren* to deal with as well."

"It seems hopeless."

"It isn't. But you must be ready. The compad will let you communicate with me." Actually Xantha would be giving the orders — Erik did not need the complication of telling Lilith she would be taking commands from a long-dead planetary dictator.

She slid the compad under the cot; her hand came back to rest lightly on his hip, staying there. He started putting things back in his pocket. Lilith leaned past him, picking up the black jade butterfly. He smelled soap on her cool, clean skin.

"This is beautiful. Where did you get it?"

"It was a present."

"Who gave it to you?" She took her hand off his hip, cupping the butterfly as if to keep it from taking flight.

"I gave it to a woman, for making love with me. She wasn't a whore," he hastened to add. "She was a student, a massage major from a good family." All the women who came Erik's way were from good families. "It's just traditional for the Prince to give a gift. More of a memento really."

"Beats all hell out of a holocam." Her tone became more distant. "How come you took it back?"

He watched her face. "She left my suite at dawn — maybe to share the good news with her mother. My bedroom was blastproof, but the attack

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caught her crossing the palace gardens. I found her jammed under an onyx basin. She must have crawled there for cover, but the blast got her anyway. That butterfly was still in her hand."

Lilith froze. She looked past the butterfly, tears brimming in her gray-blue eyes. "I am so sorry."

"It's not your fault." The bit about the butterfly was rough — but true. She needed to know how thin the lines were. People from the Home Systems went about thinking they were the Lord's chosen, half-convinced heaven would not let them fail. She had to know there really were no innocents, no chosen favorites of fate. If they won free it would be by their own efforts, or not at all.

She tried to give the butterfly back. "No, keep it." He shrugged. "It's not that important to me. I hardly knew her. But I could not stand to have some Imperial Marine prying it out of her fingers, taking it home as a souvenir of Fomalhaut."

Lilith softened, hands in her lap, still holding the butterfly. Erik could tell she was as proud as Ada, not used to asking or giving permission — but he decided to take a chance. She had brought him to the Fuck Cubicle. He kissed her. She closed her eyes and kissed back. He found the hem of her shift, sliding his hand underneath. ("Omphale, Arrhippe, turn off your sensors.") He did not mean to perform for an audience.

("Spoilsport.")

Lilith stopped him — but only for a moment, to move the butterfly to a safe spot — then she lifted the shift off over her head. She was wearing nothing underneath.

They put the Fuck Cubicle to its intended use. Erik found this love-making unusual. No scented oils. No nightstand for his favorite sex toys. The cot was hard and narrow. Lilith's whole body had been shaved; the hair growing back was short and bristling. Her technique was unpolished — surprisingly shy. Afterward she nestled against his chest, eyes closed, but not asleep. Looking down at her calm face, he wondered why she had done it. Was she lonely? Scared? She could hardly be in love — they barely knew each other, having nothing in common but tragedy. His life had been blasted out from under him, hers had come to grief on a starlit shoal. Later, back in his own double cubicle, he decided Lilith had no doubt had her reasons. They always did. Erik had yet to meet a woman who refused him. It was part of

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being a prince — something he had learned to accept without undue questioning.

Xantha was not one to waste a nanosecond. Minutes after jacking in she was ready. Erik checked with Ada on the bug language. ("I've ID'd twenty-five thousand separate signals. Let's go, Grandson.")

"Will that be enough?" Ada was always so cocksure. Everything needed to run smooth as a superconductor. ("Hell, Grandson. Bill Shakespeare made do with twenty-four thousand words. The King James Bible got by with seven thousand. Getting scared?")

"You bet, Grandma." Erik wished there was time for another trip to the cubicle — Lilith was really good for his morale. (Ada laughed. "Just look forward to more. It'll help you keep your edge on.") So he sent Lilith a warning via Xantha — then he told the Skylark to get sick.

Scaramouche was livid. Having no scruples himself, he instantly recognized betrayal. With Mikilu's help he hustled Erik aboard the pinnace, hands bound, with a bug warrior quartet for company, telling Erik to get the Skylark working or die. Erik blandly proclaimed his innocence, but as soon as the slavers had him in the Skylark's airlock he released his incapacitating fumigant. Arrhippe switched on his pulmonary filters. Micro-spores filled the tiny lock. Scaramouche and Mikilu crumpled. Distress calls erupted from both the slavers' comlinks, but Xantha smothered them. Bending down, using his bound hands, Erik plucked the comlinks out of their ears, crushing the plasti-metal components with his boot heel. He used Mikilu's kris to cut his hands free.

Inside the Skylark, Erik propped the two comatose slavers up in salon chairs, binding them with superconducting wire. Extending a micro blade from beneath his right index finger, he made a swift scratch on Scaramouche's wrist, telling Arrhippe to release an antidote to the fumigant. Sitting back with a riot pistol in each hand, he waited for them to wake up.

Mikilu opened his eyes first, took a look around and groaned. "You be really, really crazy man."

Erik gave a polite shrug. "Anything's possible."

"You're gonna fry," Scaramouche added, awaking nearly crazy with rage. "You're a walking, talking dead man."

"Aren't we all," Erik agreed happily. "Humor my last request." He leaned into Scaramouche's personal space. "Where did the xenos come

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from?"

The slaver Captain spit on him.

"I hoped you would not take that tone." Erik pointed at Scaramouche's wrist with a riot pistol. "See that cut. A slow agonizing toxin is in your system. Tell me what I want to know, or you will never live to fry me."

"Why should I believe you?"

"You don't have to." He waved the other riot gun at Mikilu. "By the time you turn black and vomit up your esophagus — my buddy Mikilu will be thrilled to talk."

Erik leaned back, listening to a report from Xantha. Wailing alarms and contradictory commands jammed the *Cape Colony's* comnet. ("All systems are go. I cut the sensors and bled oxygen out of the control stations. Hypoxia. Quick and nasty. The crew on watch is done with.") Erik winced. Xantha could be as cold-blooded as Ada when necessary — like mother, like daughter. Being long dead gave all his grandmothers very detached feelings toward mortality. He asked about the women.

("All safe on R-deck. Internal locks are sealed tight.")

He glanced at Scaramouche, then grinned to Mikilu. "The Captain's cut is starting to fester." Scaramouche jerked his bound hand out of sight. He was sweating, no longer making cheerful references to torture and dismemberment. "If you turn over those riot pistols, *maybe* we can do a deal."

Erik looked at the weapons in his hands. "Two pistols for a quick trip to the organ banks — hardly tempting. Tell me where the xenos came from, before your larynx freezes up."

Scaramouche licked his lips and considered. "Okay, the big boss found them, the old man aboard the *Siren*."

"Found them where?"

"That's the weird part. He found them drifting in deep space, aboard a sort of ship. Beyond the Kaitos."

"What sort of ship?" Erik did not think that was so weird. He had suspected something of the sort ever since he discovered the xenos all had a common origin.

"Very sublight. A big chrysalis, or egg case." Scaramouche spewed details — once underway he was as hard to stop as a 3V newscast. "A kind of cocoon with thermonuclear auxiliaries and solar sails. Really primitive."

And really alien. Semiramis had been half-right — the xenos came from

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Human Space, but not from any planet. "Where and when did you find this ship?"

Scaramouche rattled off a date and coordinates. (Philonoe checked the space-time geometry—"It's possible, Grandson. He could have done it, after the *Siren* left Fomalhaut, and before the *Cape Colony* vanished.") Fairly well convinced, Erik turned to Mikilu. "Anything to add?"

"The Captain be correct."

"I hope that's true." He got up and stabbed Mikilu with his index finger. The slaver cursed him. Erik straightened up. "If this story checks, you'll both get the antidote."

"It's true, damn you." Scaramouche stared in horror at the blisters on his wrist. "What if you don't come back?"

"Then my problems will be as bad as yours."

Scaramouche made hateful gargling noises. Arrhippe released more of the fumigant, and Erik's prisoners went comatose. He had done his damnedest to sound cruel as the grave, but there had never been enough venom in either jab to do more than raise skin blisters — he merely needed them terrified enough to tell the truth. And a little concern for man's mortality would do both Mikilu and his captain a galaxy of good. Erik pried under the Skylark's mass converter, found the binary anti-matter bomb and pocketed it. Then he had Ada order the xenos to take him back to the *Cape Colony*—they obeyed without question. ("Grandson, just call me the queen bee.")

Xantha warned him to enter the colony ship wearing a rebreather. The hangar deck was deserted. Alarms dopplered back and forth. Lighters and ship's boats were grounded. Hangar gravity had gone dead, and shirt-sleeved bodies floated by. Gray Tigers and slavers had each been told that the other gang had tried to seize the ship. Xantha was directing the battle on both sides. Creating maximum confusion. Maximum casualties. Gleefully turning *Cape Colony* into a charnel house. The drop shaft had breathable air, and Xantha reset the gravity fields — she had sounded general quarters, then upped the field to ten gees. Bug warriors lay broken at both ends of the shaft. Mercs and slavers had splattered.

There was no longer a guard at R-deck. Lilith was waiting just inside the lock. Looking scared and exalted, she threw her arms around him, ignoring the women crowded behind her. "I feared you were gone. It's almighty good to have you alive and whole."

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Erik was pretty pleased himself. With Lilith pressed against him, he calculated rapidly, wondering if there was time for a fast visit to the Fuck Cubicle. Having to work to get a woman was turning out to be exhilarating. ("Put it on hold, Grandson, the job's just begun.") He settled for a deep, passionate kiss, then told her, "We still have *Siren* to deal with." He pushed the spare riot pistol into her hand.

She took the weapon without looking at it. "There are hundreds of bodies on life support in the infirmary."

"Eh?" Erik could not think what she meant by that.

"Your grandmother told us."

"Xantha?"

"That's right. The old lady in the compad."

Left to run loose, Xantha was being awfully free with family secrets. "So?"

"They almost have to be colonists. Unconscious but alive."

Erik nodded. He had planned to give her the riot gun, then go tackle the *Siren*, but Lilith was desperate to check the infirmary — this was their first hint that the other colonists might be alive. Rather than argue, he went with her, just the two of them, into the drop shaft, up to I-deck. The bodies decorating the drop shaft did not get a second look — Lilith had even less sympathy for their captors than he did. The infirmary was sealed. Xantha undid the locks and turned up the lights. Erik saw rows of small naked bodies floating in nutrient vats, wired to life-support monitors.

"The male children." Lilith stood staring at the vats, a fist pressed hard against her lips. Erik put his arm around her. It made sense. Their captors had no use for small body parts — the boys were left to mature in the vats, until bones, limbs, and organs were big enough to harvest. He whispered, "Xantha says they can be revived — there is no sign of brain death."

She nodded. "Their mothers will be so happy." He could see she had been hoping that somehow, someway, her parents might be here in the infirmary. Now she knew for sure they were dead — but she said nothing to take away from the joy of finding these boys alive. Erik had never known anyone to be at once so tough and caring. He kissed her good-bye at the R-deck lock. She laid her head on his shoulder, twining her fingers in his. "Take care. Come back."

"I will." What was going to happen if he survived his social call on the

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Siren? Erik had never cared for someone outside the family. Could he be falling in love? What a bizarre idea.

("Grandson, quit mooning and get going.") Ada, always a realist, had the centauroid pilot and the bug warriors waiting patiently aboard the pinnace. They showed no curiosity about the havoc aboard *Cape Colony*. Not their department. Xantha was making sure only routine signals escaped the colony ship. Ada directed the pilot to take them to the *Siren*. ("I'm sending out a general traffic code, and a special suffix used to dock with *Siren*.")

He had to trust in Ada. Without her, all he had were his pistols, grenades, and the binary bomb in his pocket — not much against an armed merchant cruiser full of gun-waving spiders. A slight shudder, and they were docked with *Siren*. The lock cycled. He turned his hood up, and tuned the 3V jacket to a fair imitation of a bug warrior's head and thorax, giving himself a huge gorget and heavy carapace — a sort of human insect cross. Flanked by the four bug warriors, he entered the *Siren*. The semi-disguise may have been unnecessary. It is hard to know what impresses a xeno. Besides it was nearly pitch black aboard the *Siren* — only an occasional red battle lamp was lit.

Ada guided his steps, though the *Siren*'s decks had been turned into a dark maze, littered with the most amazing junk — scrap metal, spares, foam bedding, ration cases, and comp consoles, heaped against bulkheads and blocking doorways. New doorways had been cut haphazardly, with little concern for pressure integrity. A single hull puncture would have evacuated half the ship.

("Don't blame me, Grandson. I turned over this ship in terrific shape.")

"Someone must have remodeled." Erik did not see a human anywhere, but he had spotted several new types of xenos — including little mini-bugs that might be juveniles. No one paid him the least attention until they came to an armored pressure door that still appeared airtight. Two adult bug warriors barred his way — tall skinny ones.

("Hold on, Grandson — I think these are the palace guards, let me flip through some passwords.")

Erik stood waiting. Presently the two warriors stepped aside, letting him cycle through. ("Wasn't hard." Ada chuckled. "Just a variation on the polite request address. It's a language — not a code.")

Once through the lock, Erik saw why the *Siren* had to be so drastically redesigned. The entire center of the ship had been hollowed out, creating a

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deep amphitheater scaled to inhuman proportions. Decks had been cut into concentric rings of decreasing size, looking like an open pit mine — or the circles of Dante's Inferno — each level crawled with xenos in various stages of development. At the lowest level, where Satan should have sat, was a huge object that had to be the xeno starship. It did not look like a starship — it more closely resembled the galaxy's largest loaf of pumpernickel, semi-preserved since pre-atomic times. The blackened surface bore cobalt-green growths and irregular patches of color — mottled orange, old gold and burnt maroon. Centauroid workers trooped in and out of a hole at one end of the loaf. Control tendrils snaked through the orifice, leading to man-sized objects crouching near the opening.

Descending the dim pit, Erik saw the tethered objects were indeed semi-human, like the ornamental sphinxes that decorated fashionable doorways back home in Fomalhaut B — only ten times more hideous. They were kneeling men, covered with some translucent gum. The preservative was not perfect — clothes were rotting off the emaciated bodies, sometimes taking the skin with them. Bones showed. Wisps of hair were pressed against discolored flesh. The tendrils entered at the base of their skulls, tapping into the brainstem — each face wore a horrible skeletal grin.

("Meet the officers of the *Siren*," Ada told him — the tough old trot did not sound the least shaken. "That joker in the center is the one I did the refit for." Erik glanced briefly at the grinning flesh-covered skull. It could have been the Lord of Hosts. He did not look long enough to be sure.

("Grandson, keep these Halloween lawn jockeys entertained — I'll try to get the attention of the folks inside.") Erik stood for a terrible long time, ringed by his bug warrior escort, watching centauroids scurry in and out of the xeno starship. The ones coming out had opaque packages that might be egg cysts. After an eternity Ada broke into his thoughts. ("Reach in your pocket and arm that binary bomb — but for heaven's sake hold your finger over the trigger, don't let it go off.")

"Right, Grandma Ada." His hand went into his jacket pocket. Now he had something important to do. If he let go of the bomb, matter and anti-matter would mix. $E=MC^2$. There would be nothing left of the *Siren* but a big hole in the vacuum.

After a longer time Ada was back. ("It was hellish getting their attention, but that binary bomb helped.")

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"Getting whose attention, Grandma Ada?"

("The Hive Queens. Creators of the Universe. The Almighty Matriarchs. Whatever you want to call them. The ones who have been puppeteering this show — ever since they put the officers of the *Siren* in a state of perpetual orgasm."

Erik looked closely at the nearest kneeling figure. The man's genitals were badly withered, but Erik could see an erection showing through the rotted trousers. He shuddered. ("Eternal bliss, boy — no wonder they are grinning. You want to try it? The Hive Queens offered to hook you up.")

"I'll pass, Add."

("Thought you might. I politely declined, cutting a different deal with them.")

"What deal?"

("They are going to give us the Skylark and *Cape Colony*, and they will disarm the *Siren* — if you will leave and take your bomb with you. It is making them nervous.")

"It's giving me seizures. But what about the planet?"

("They picked it intentionally to share with us. This is how they reproduce. They aim shiploads of egg cysts at sectors emitting coded electromagnetic signals — hoping to be discovered by oxygen breathers. It takes millions of years and thousands of tries, but a lot of hive organisms favor low probability broadcast reproduction — reduces competition between colonies. Eventually someone stumbles onto their ship. They start by being incredibly useful — then end up running things.")

"Sort of galactic parasites?"

("More like broad spectrum symbionts. They assumed they were doing us a favor.")

"By massacring the men and crew of the *Cape Colony*? By turning the *Siren*'s officers into orgiastic vegetables?"

("They found us making our usual alarming muddle of things. They were shocked to discover the *Siren* was a ship full of males — can't start a colony that way. So they went hunting for females, which meant seizing the *Cape Colony*. They still had way too many males...")

"So they killed off the *Cape Colony*'s males, and the women above breeding age."

("Objectionable, but I can see their point about the men.")

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"You would, Grandma Ada."

("Judge not, lest thou be judged, Grandson.")

"So, why the Lord of Hosts routine?"

("They ransacked these officers' memories — trying to find a way of appealing to our squalid selfish psyches. The Hive Mothers liked this old-time religion — once they knocked the crude edges off. They felt it lifted us out of our greedy ignorance, giving us a higher calling. The good of the race, not the race for the good.")

Back aboard the Skylark, with a five-star meal under his waistband, Erik twirled the last of the Amontillado in his snifter. Some swinish bastard had plundered the cellarette. Scaramouche was a prime suspect — but the good captain was beyond punishment, marooned on the planet, along with Mikilu and the survivors of the battle for *Cape Colony*. Not nearly a fit sentence for hijacking, larceny, mass murder, false imprisonment, and swilling the princely sherry — but Erik had learned not to seek justice in such an imperfect Universe. Living well was the *only* revenge.

His lock cycled. He watched Lilith enter. She had come by pinnace from *Cape Colony*. By now he knew he was in love, hopelessly so. What had done it? The terror they had gone through together? Was she just the first woman he had to work for? ("Grandson, after living next to your libido, I'd say...")

"Leave my libido alone, Ada."

Lilith smiled. By now she was used to Erik talking to his grandmothers. Hastily he shifted subjects. "What's the verdict?"

"Almost to a woman we voted to go home."

"I'm shocked it was not unanimous."

"You don't know women as well as you think. We had cut our ties. This is hardly the colony we expected — but some figure now that we are here..."

"It is a pretty planet. What about you?"

"Hardly." She shook her head decisively. "I could not settle in with the men who murdered my parents."

"Could you settle in with me?"

She strolled over, took the sherry snifter out of Erik's hand and slid into his lap, running fingers through his curls. "I was hoping you would come back with me."

"Impossible. There's a price on my head."

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"Such a handsome head," she cooed.

"That's biosculpt. Boys in our family are born pretty plain looking."

"Then we shall have girls. Look, two hundred years will have passed — you will be coming back a hero."

"Wouldn't matter if it was two thousand years. The Imps don't dare let me loose in Fomalhaut B, *especially* as a hero — I'd be too sharp a focus for native resistance."

"Who says you are going to Fomalhaut?"

"Eh?"

"I want to take you back to Tau Ceti IV with me."

"The Home Systems?" Erik pictured planets full of happy-eyed 3V addicts, gullible consumers, scrubbed children in their school colors.

"Of course. That's where you would be a hero. A rebel prince who risked his freedom to return our lost colony. A piece of history come real. Very romantic. You would be no risk to anyone — except for adoring females."

"You make it sound plausible."

"Our planetary government would vote you immunity — my family is very old, very influential. An honorary citizenship. Medals. Planetary tours and 3V contracts." She shifted around to straddle his lap. "You are cute enough to play yourself."

He pressed her close. "I suppose I could adjust."

She kissed him hard, taking her time.

("Grandson, I told you...")

"Right, so log off, Ada."

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Dave Wolverton, *Path of the Hero* (Bantam/Spectra, paper, 419pp, $5.99)

IT'S A SHAME when a powerful, original work of science fiction is killed by the publisher's art department, but that's what is apparently happening with Dave Wolverton's third — and best so far — novel. Not that the cover art is bad. It's just dark and drab and there is nothing about the presentation to suggest that this is a special book.

To which the obvious answer is that not *all* books can have "special" treatment. If every book published had embossed or cut-out covers or white backgrounds or bold, clear art, then these techniques would become passé and nothing would stand out from the crowd.

That makes sense, of course. I'm just baffled by the decision to make *this* book blend in with all the midlist and marginal books published at the same time. (The editor is already saying, "We don't publish any marginal books, and this cover is *excellent.*" But editors have to say that; it helps even more if they mean it. But it doesn't change the fact that *Path of the Hero* has been made invisible on the shelves.)

Special treatment costs more, and editors have to pick very carefully which ones to spend that extra effort on. I cannot fathom their choices, just as I have no clue why such seminal works as Ben Bova's *Mars* and Norman Spinrad's *Russian Spring* managed to make it through the award season without mention by the Nebula voters. Apparently somebody somewhere decides who's hot from month to month, and I can tell you, whoever it is doesn't consult with *me.*

You want to know what I think is hot? How about a novel in which a writer takes a now-ancient science fiction motif — the revival of Neanderthal man — and makes something astonishingly powerful and

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fresh out of it? While *Path of the Hero* is as rip-snorting an adventure as you could hope to find — a world at war, alliances of many sentient creatures coming together in a last-ditch effort to win their freedom from a slave-based empire, characters you know and care about finding love and meaning in the midst of death and chaos — it is also a profoundly philosophical work.

In Wolverton's world of Anee (previously visited in *Serpent Catch*, a prequel which you do *not* have to read in order to enjoy *Path*), terraformers from Earth created a vast zoo in which they restored the flora and fauna of the Jurassic, Miocene, and Pliocene on three separate continents. Several sentient and near-sentient species of proto-humans were included, and when the alien Eridani from another star system effectively ended all human starflight, these ancient people and *Homo sapiens* were forced to make the best of things on the surface of the Earth.

Now, long after, two dangers face Anee. The slavers are making their final bid for world domination, wiping out the last strongholds of freedom; and the descendants of the original paleobiologists are now mindlessly setting out to destroy sentient life because it is endangering the environment. And the best hope of stopping both is a man named Tull, who is half human and half Neanderthal — or, as they call themselves, *Pwi*.

For me, what lifts this book out of the first rank of quest-adventures and onto another plane entirely is Wolverton's creation of the Pwi, a people who are as loving and spiritual as Homo sapiens is angry and rational. The Pwi have much greater strength, but also much more compassion, and in the process of this book we learn that the Neanderthals were not defeated in their contest with *Homo sapiens*. Rather they made a tactical decision, to bide their time until a future that could truly belong to them, the kind of world on which they could happily live. This book is about the struggle to make Anee that world.

So if you want an extraordinary novel of ideas that coexists quite easily with a powerful story of adventure and character, go look among the bland bluish covers of midlist science fiction books, down near the bottom shelf of the last sf rack, where the works of Wolverton are alphabetically fated to reside. Pick up *Path of the Hero*. You won't soon forget this book.

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M.J. Engh, *Rainbow Man* (TOR, cloth, 253pp, $17.95)

Just in case Mary Jane Engh's gentle demeanor and pinafore name suggest to you that there will be something meek about her fiction, let me remind you that this is the author of one of the most brutal — and brilliant — novels of our generation, *Arslan*.

Brutal this book, *Rainbow Man*, is not. But it is still a hard-edged, philosophically complex book, with characters who are caught up in a society that in the search for moral purity has achieved something far more monstrous and dangerous than even they imagine. If there were not so many real-world analogues, one might dismiss Engh's vision as being too dark and peculiar to matter. But we live in a time when extremely Correct people of both the Left and the Right insist on demonizing their opponents, until almost *any* behavior to oppose them is justified. "Anti-life baby-killers!" screams one side, and the other side screams back, "Fascist misogynists!" All opponents of the Right are quick-fitted with convenient labels like "satanist" and "secular humanist"; the Left bedecks its opponents with off-the-tack epithets like "homophobe," "genocide," and "racist," both sides blithely disregarding the actual arguments of those opponents — for who needs to take seriously the ideas of satanist homophobic secular genocidal humanist racist anti-life fascist misogynist baby-killers? It is this matter of labels and dehumanization that Engh deals with deftly and unforgettably in *Rainbow Man*.

Liss, the hero of *Rainbow Man*, begins with the momentous step of leaving her starship, knowing that she is making an irrevocable break with the past. She always has the option of leaving Bimran, the planet she has adopted as her home — but she'd like to make a go of it.

Immediately, though, she runs into a problem. Because she had herself sterilized on board ship long before, Bimran's immigration officials immediately categorized her as a man instead of a woman. Their definition is ruthlessly simple: If you are an adult and you can bear children, you are a female; if you are an adult and cannot bear children, you are a man.

However, this means that any sexual relationship Liss might become involved in with a genuine male would be classed on Bimran as homosexuality; it hardly needs pointing out that this would have dire consequences — not for Liss, since she's an offworlder, but for whatever

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citizen of Bimran was so perverted as to love her.

And who is it who does fall in love with Liss? The very man who, as an agent of the powerful authorities, is responsible for tracking her and neutralizing any cultural influence she might have.

What complicates things further is that Bimran's religion has abolished the concept of an afterlife in heaven or hell. On the contrary, Bimran provides heaven or hell in *this* life. People of extraordinary virtue are given a life of continual pleasure through direct stimulation of the brain, while people of extraordinary sinfulness are kept alive as long as possible to endure unending torment (the echo of Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" is, I'm sure, deliberate). Both are on display for the edification of true believers.

Though the book moves deliberately and conversationally, it culminates in violent action and ends with a love story made tragic by faith. I'm not sure whether it is a flaw in the book or merely one of Engh's philosophical points that in the end, what makes it impossible for Liss to live on Bimran is not the religious system itself but the fact that the powers-that-be are themselves violating it. So often those who would attack organized religion in the fiction "cheat" by revealing all religious systems to be hypocritical; but I suspect that Engh's point is that, dreadful as this system might seem, it worked as stably as any other *until* the hypocritical exploitation began. Liss might not have left if they had not changed the rules. Just one of many things that Engh left me pondering when the novel was done.

No one will ever accuse Engh of being a "fun read." But I can also assure you that few writers have used the tropes of science fiction with such powerful results, and while *Rainbow Man* is not the timeless classic that *Arslan* is and will remain, one can hardly expect an author to achieve monumental results every time out of the gate. There are many talented writers in our field, but far more rare are those that we can call wise.

Adèle Geras, *The Tower Room* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992 [UK 1990], cloth, young adult, 150pp, $15.95)

I very much approve of updating fairy tales, retelling them with fresh vision. But it's disappointing when, along with the retelling, the author feels it necessary to strip away the magic.

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This young adult novel sets the story of Rapunzel in a girls' school in England, where the orphaned heroine is only figuratively kept in a tower by a headmistress who is also her guardian. While the novel is slow going at first, the tension does build as the young heroine falls in love, only to find that the headmistress has very strong reasons for making sure the young man does *not* get up the tower.

This is not a bad book; it is, in fact, rather a good book, though perhaps overburdened with writerliness. But Geras and her publishers made a grave mistake by emphasizing this story's root in the tale of Rapunzel. For with every similarity, every reminder, the reader cannot help but feel how much magic is missing from this version. There is nothing wrong with realism, of course. But it is wise for a writer to remember that when realism is openly compared with fantasy, it almost always comes out looking a little dingy and gray by contrast. In *The Tower Room*, alas, I found that the story as told was simply not strong enough to survive the comparison that it forced upon us. No doubt many readers won't feel that way; perhaps the natural audience for such an assertively magicless book is the sort of person who thinks children should be forbidden to read fairy tales or believe in Santa Claus.

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As of this writing, the Ron Walotsky painting inspired by Charles de Lint's "Bridges" (the cover story in our October/November, 1992 issue) has been nominated for a Hugo Award, given at the World Science Fiction convention. Charles's stories often have strong visual imagery combined with gentle, fantastic elements.

"The Bone Woman" shares those characteristics. The Bone Woman herself is one of the most interesting characters to appear in fiction in a long time.

The Bone Woman

By Charles de Lint

NO ONE REALLY STOPS TO think of Ellie Spink, and why should they?

She's no one.

She has nothing.

She was homely as a child. All that the passing of years did was add to her unattractiveness. Face like a horse, jaw long and square, forehead broad; limpid eyes set bird-wide on either side of a gargantuan nose; hair a nondescript brown, greasy and matted, stuffed up under a woolen touque lined with a patchwork of metal foil scavenged from discarded cigarette packages. The angularity of her slight frame doesn't get its volume from her meager diet, but from the multiple layers of clothing she wears.

Raised in foster homes, she's been used, but she's never experienced a kiss. Institutionalized for most of her adult life, she's been medicated, but never treated. Pass her on the street and your gaze slides right on by, never pausing to register the difference between the old woman huddled in the doorway and a bag of garbage.

Old woman? Though she doesn't know it, Monday, two weeks past, was

"The Bone Woman" originally appeared as a Triskell Press chapbook, December 1992, in an edition of 125 copies. *Copyright © 1992 by Charles de Lint. Reprinted by permission of the author.*

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her thirty-seventh birthday. She looks twice her age.

There's no point in trying to talk to her. Usually no one's home. When there is, the words spill out in a disjointed mumble, a rambling, one-sided dialogue itemizing a litany of misperceived conspiracies and ills that soon leave you feeling as confused as she herself must be.

Normal conversation is impossible and not many bother to try it. The exceptions are few: the odd pitying passerby. A concerned social worker, fresh out of college and new to the streets. Maybe one of the other street people who happens to stumble into her particular haunts.

They talk and she listens or she doesn't — she never makes any sort of relevant response, so who can tell? Few push the matter. Fewer still, however well-intentioned, have the stamina to make the attempt to do so more than once or twice. It's easier to just walk away; to bury your guilt, or laugh off her confused ranting as the excessive rhetoric it can only be.

I've done it myself.

I used to try to talk to her when I first started seeing her around, but I didn't get far. Angel told me a little about her, but even knowing her name and some of her history didn't help.

"Hey, Ellie. How're you doing?"

Pale eyes, almost translucent, turn toward me, set so far apart it's as though she can only see me with one eye at a time.

"They should test for aliens," she tells me. "You know, like in the Olympics."

"Aliens?"

"I mean, who cares who killed Kennedy? Dead's dead, right?"

"What's Kennedy got to do with aliens?"

"I don't even know why they took down the Berlin Wall. What about the one in China? Shouldn't they have worked on that one first?"

It's like trying to have a conversation with a game of Trivial Pursuit that specializes in information garnered from supermarket tabloids. After a while I'd just pack an extra sandwich whenever I was busking in her neighborhood. I'd sit beside her, share my lunch and let her talk if she wanted to, but I wouldn't say all that much myself.

That all changed the day I saw her with the Bone Woman.

I didn't call her the Bone Woman at first; the adjective that came more

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immediately to mind was fat. She couldn't have been much more than five foot one, but she had to weigh in at two-fifty, leaving me with the impression that she was wider than she was tall. But she was light on her feet — particularly graceful for all her squat bulk.

She had a round face like a full moon, framed by thick black hair that hung in two long braids to her waist. Her eyes were small, almost lost in that expanse of face, and so dark they seemed all pupil. She went barefoot in a shapeless black dress, her only accessory an equally shapeless shoulder-bag made of some kind of animal skin and festooned with dangling thongs from which hung various feathers, beads, bottle-caps and other found objects.

I paused at the far end of the street when I saw the two of them together. I had a sandwich for Ellie in my knapsack, but I hesitated in approaching them. They seemed deep in conversation, real conversation, give and take, and Ellie was — knitting? Talking *and* knitting? The pair of them looked like a couple of old gossips, sitting on the back porch of their building. The sight of Ellie acting so normal was something I didn't want to interrupt.

I sat down on a nearby stoop and watched until Ellie put away her knitting and stood up. She looked down at her companion with an expression in her features that I'd never seen before. It was awareness, I realized. She was completely *here* for a change.

As she came up the street, I stood up and called a greeting to her, but by the time she reached me she wore her usual vacuous expression.

"It's the newspapers," she told me. "They use radiation to print them and that's what makes the news seem so bad."

Before I could take the sandwich I'd brought her out of my knapsack, she'd shuffled off, around the corner, and was gone. I glanced back down the street to where the fat woman was still sitting, and decided to find Ellie later. Right now I wanted to know what the woman had done to get such a positive reaction out of Ellie.

When I approached, the fat woman was sifting through the refuse where the two of them had been sitting. As I watched, she picked up a good-sized bone. What kind, I don't know, but it was as long as my forearm and as big around as the neck of my fiddle. Brushing dirt and a sticky candy wrapper from it, she gave it a quick polish on the sleeve of her dress and stuffed it away in her shoulderbag. Then she looked up at me.

My question died stillborn in my throat under the sudden scrutiny of

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those small dark eyes. She looked right through me — not the drifting, unfocused gaze of so many of the street people, but a cold far-off seeing that weighed my presence, dismissed it, and gazed further off at something far more important.

I stood back as she rose easily to her feet. That was when I realized how graceful she was. She moved down the sidewalk as daintily as a doe, as though her bulk was filled with helium, rather than flesh, and weighed nothing. I watched her until she reached the far end of the street, turned her own corner and then, just like Ellie, was gone as well.

I ended up giving Ellie's sandwich to Johnny Rew, an old wino who's taught me a fiddle tune or two, the odd time I've run into him sober.

I started to see the Bone Woman everywhere after that day. I wasn't sure if she was just new to town, or if it was one of those cases where you see something or someone you've never noticed before and after that you see them all the time. Everybody I talked to about her seemed to know her, but no one was quite sure how long she'd been in the city, or where she lived, or even her name.

I still wasn't calling her the Bone Woman, though I knew by then that bones were all she collected. Old bones, found bones, rattling around together in her shoulderbag until she went off at the end of the day and showed up the next morning, ready to start filling her bag again.

When she wasn't hunting bones, she spent her time with the street's worst cases — people like Ellie that no one else could talk to. She'd get them making things — little pictures or carvings or beadwork, keeping their hands busy. And talking. Someone like Ellie still made no sense to anybody else, but you could tell when she was with the Bone Woman that they were sharing a real dialogue. Which was a good thing, I suppose, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more going on, something if not exactly sinister, then still strange.

It was the bones, I suppose. There were so many. How could she keep finding them the way she did? And what did she do with them?

My brother Christy collects urban legends, the way the Bone Woman collects her bones, rooting them out where you'd never think they could be. But when I told him about her, he just shrugged.

"Who knows why any of them do anything?" he said.

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Christy doesn't live on the streets, for all that he haunts them. He's just an observer — always has been, ever since we were kids. To him, the street people can be pretty well evenly divided between the sad cases and the crazies. Their stories are too human for him.

"Some of these are big," I told him. "The size of a human thighbone."

"So point her out to the cops."

"And tell them what?"

A smile touched his lips with just enough superiority in it to get under my skin. He's always been able to do that. Usually, it makes me do something I regret later which I sometimes think is half his intention. It's not that he wants to see me hurt. It's just part and parcel of that air of authority that all older siblings seem to wear. You know, a raised eyebrow, a way of smiling that says "You have so much to learn, little brother."

"If you really want to know what she does with those bones," he said, "why don't you follow her home and find out?"

"Maybe I will."

IT TURNED out that the Bone Woman had a squat on the roof of an abandoned factory building in the Tombs. She'd built herself some kind of a shed up there — just a leaning, ramshackle affair of cast-off lumber and sheet metal, but it kept out the weather and could easily be heated with a woodstove in the spring and fall. Come winter, she'd need warmer quarters, but the snows were still a month or so away.

I followed her home one afternoon, then came back the next day when she was out to finally put to rest my fear about these bones she was collecting. The thought that had stuck in my mind was that she was taking something away from the street people like Ellie, people who were already at the bottom rung and deserved to be helped, or at least just left alone. I'd gotten this weird idea that the bones were tied up with the last remnants of vitality that someone like Ellie might have, and the Bone Woman was stealing it from them.

What I found was more innocuous, and at the same time creepier, than I'd expected.

The inside of her squat was littered with bones and wire and dog-shaped skeletons that appeared to be made from the two. Bones held in place by wire,

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half-connected ribs and skulls and limbs. A pack of bone dogs. Some of the figures were almost complete, others were merely suggestions, but everywhere I looked, the half-finished wire-and-bone skeletons sat or stood or hung suspended from the ceiling. There had to be more than a dozen in various states of creation.

I stood in the doorway, not willing to venture any further, and just stared at them all. I don't know how long I was there, but finally I turned away and made my way back down through the abandoned building and out onto the street.

So now I knew what she did with the bones. But it didn't tell me how she could find so many of them. Surely that many stray dogs didn't die, their bones scattered the length and breadth of the city like so much autumn residue?

Amy and I had a gig opening for the Kelledys that night. It didn't take me long to set up. I just adjusted my microphone, laid out my fiddle and whistles on a small table to one side, and then kicked my heels while Amy fussed with her pipes and the complicated tangle of electronics that she used to amplify them.

I've heard it said that all Uillean pipers are a little crazy — that they have to be to play an instrument that looks more like what you'd find in the back of a plumber's truck than an instrument — but I think of them as perfectionists. Every one I've ever met spends more time fiddling with their reeds and adjusting the tuning of their various chanters, drones, and regulators than would seem humanly possible.

Amy's no exception. After awhile I left her there on the stage, with her red hair falling in her face as she poked and prodded at a new reed she'd made for one of her drones, and wandered into the back where the Kelledys were making their own preparations for the show which consisted of drinking tea and looking beatific. At least that's the way I always think of the two of them. I don't think I've ever met calmer people.

Jilly likes to think of them as mysterious, attributing all kinds of fairy tale traits to them. Meran, she's convinced, with the green highlights in her nut-brown hair and her wise brown eyes, is definitely dryad material — the spirit of an oak tree come to life — while Cerin is some sort of wizard figure, a combination of adept and bard. I think the idea amuses them and they play

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it up to Jilly. Nothing you can put your finger on, but they seem to get a kick out of spinning a mysterious air about themselves whenever she's around.

I'm far more practical than Jilly — actually, just about anybody's more practical than Jilly, God bless her, but that's another story. I think if you find yourself using the word magic to describe the Kelledys, what you're really talking about is their musical talent. They may seem preternaturally calm off-stage, but as soon as they begin to play, that calmness is transformed into a bonfire of energy. There's enchantment then, burning on stage, but it comes from their instrumental skill.

"Geordie," Meran said after I'd paced back and forth for a few minutes. "You look a little edgy. Have some tea."

I had to smile. If the Kelledys had originated from some mysterious elsewhere, then I'd lean more toward them having come from a fiddle tune than Jilly's fairy tales.

"When sick is it tea you want?" I said, quoting the title of an old Irish jig that we all knew in common.

Meran returned my smile. "It can't hurt. Here," she added, rummaging around in a bag that was lying by her chair. "Let me see if I have something that'll ease your nervousness."

"I'm not nervous."

"No, of course not," Cerin put in. "Geordie just likes to pace, don't you?"

He was smiling as he spoke, but without a hint of Christy's sometimes annoying demeanor.

"No, really. It's just...."

"Just what?" Meran asked as my voice trailed off.

Well, here was the perfect opportunity to put Jilly's theories to the test, I decided. If the Kelledys were in fact as fey as she made them out to be, then they'd be able to explain this business with the bones, wouldn't they?

So I told them about the fat woman and her bones and what I'd found in her squat. They listened with far more reasonableness than I would have if someone had been telling the story to me — especially when I went on to explain the weird feeling I'd been getting from the whole business.

"It's giving me the creeps," I said, finishing up, "and I can't even say why."

"*La Huesera,*" Cerin said when I was done.

Meran nodded. "The Bone Woman," she said, translating it for me. "It

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does sound like her."

"So you know her."

"No," Meran said. "It just reminds us of a story we heard when we were playing in Phoenix a few years ago. There was a young Apache man opening for us and he and I started comparing flutes. We got on to one of the Native courting flutes which used to be made from human bone and somehow from there he started telling me about a legend they have in the Southwest about this old fat woman who wanders through the mountains and *arroyos*, collecting bones from the desert that she brings back to her cave."

"What does she collect them for?"

"To preserve the things that are in danger of being lost to the world," Cerin said.

"I don't get it."

"I'm not sure of the exact details," Cerin went on, "but it had something to do with the spirits of endangered species."

"Giving them a new life," Meran said.

"Or a second chance."

"But there's no desert around here," I said. "What would this Bone Woman be doing up here?"

Meran smiled. "I remember John saying that she'd been seen as often riding shotgun in an eighteen-wheeler as walking down a dry wash."

"And besides," Cerin added. "Any place is a desert when there's more going on underground than on the surface."

That described Newford perfectly. And who lived a more hidden life than the street people? They were right in front of us every day, but most people didn't even see them anymore. And who was more deserving of a second chance than someone like Ellie who'd never even gotten a fair first chance?

"Too many of us live desert lives," Cerin said, and I knew just what he meant.

The gig went well. I was a little bemused, but I didn't make any major mistakes. Amy complained that her regulators had sounded too buzzy in the monitors, but that was just Amy. They'd sounded great to me, their counterpointing chords giving the tunes a real punch whenever they came in.

The Kelledys' set was pure magic. Amy and I watched them from the

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stage wings and felt higher as they took their final bow than we had when the applause had been directed at us.

I begged off getting together with them after the show, regretfully pleading tiredness. I *was* tired, but leaving the theater, I headed for an abandoned factory in the Tombs instead of home. When I got up on the roof of the building, the moon was full. It looked like a saucer of buttery gold, bathing everything in warm yellow light. I heard a soft voice on the far side of the roof near the Bone Woman's squat. It wasn't exactly singing, but not chanting either. A murmuring, sliding sound that raised the hairs at the nape of my neck.

I walked a little nearer, staying in the shadows of the cornices, until I could see the Bone Woman. I paused then, laying my fiddle case quietly on the roof and sliding down so that I was sitting with my back against the cornice.

The Bone Woman had one of her skeleton sculptures set out in front of her and she was singing over it. The dog shape was complete now, all the bones wired in place and gleaming in the moonlight. I couldn't make out the words of her song. Either there were none, or she was using a language I'd never heard before. As I watched, she stood, raising her arms up above the wired skeleton, and her voice grew louder.

The scene was peaceful — soothing, in the same way that the Kelledys' company could be — but eerie as well. The Bone Woman's voice had the cadence of one of the medicine chants I'd heard at a powwow up on the Kickaha Reservation — the same nasal tones and ringing quality. But that powwow hadn't prepared me for what came next.

At first I wasn't sure that I was really seeing it. The empty spaces between the skeleton's bones seemed to gather volume and fill out, as though flesh were forming on the bones. Then there was fur, highlit by moonlight, and I couldn't deny it anymore. I saw a bewhiskered muzzle lift skyward, ears twitch, a tail curl up, thick-haired and strong. The powerful chest began to move rhythmically, at first in time to the Bone Woman's song, then breathing of its own accord.

The Bone Woman hadn't been making dogs in her squat, I realized as I watched the miraculous change occur. She'd been making wolves.

The newly animated creature's eyes snapped open and it leapt up, running to the edge of the roof. There it stood with its forelegs on the cornice.

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Arcing its neck, the wolf pointed its nose at the moon and howled.

I sat there, already stunned, but the transformation still wasn't complete. As the wolf howled, it began to change again. Fur to human skin. Lupine shape, to that of a young woman. Howl to merry laughter. And as she turned, I recognized her features.

"Ellie," I breathed.

She still had the same horsy features, the same skinny body, all bones and angles, but she was beautiful. She blazed with the fire of a spirit that had never been hurt, never been abused, never been degraded. She gave me a radiant smile and then leapt from the edge of the roof.

I held my breath, but she didn't fall. She walked out across the city's skyline, out across the urban desert of rooftops and chimneys, off and away, running now, laughter trailing behind her until she was swallowed by the horizon.

I stared out at the night sky long after she had disappeared, then slowly stood up and walked across the roof to where the Bone Woman was sitting outside the door of her squat. She tracked my approach, but there was neither welcome nor dismissal in those small dark eyes. It was like the first time I'd come up to her; as far as she was concerned, I wasn't there at all.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

She looked through, past me.

"Can you teach me that song? I want to help, too."

Still no response.

"Why won't you *talk* to me?"

Finally her gaze focused on me.

"You don't have their need," she said.

Her voice was thick with an accent I couldn't place. I waited for her to go on, to explain what she meant, but once again, she ignored me. The pinpoints of black that passed for eyes in that round moon face looked away into a place where I didn't belong.

Finally, I did the only thing left for me to do. I collected my fiddle case and went on home.

Some things haven't changed. Ellie's still living on the streets and I still share my lunch with her when I'm down in her part of town. There's nothing the Bone Woman can do to change what this life has done to the Ellie Spinks

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of the world.

But what I saw that night gives me hope for the next turn of the wheel. I know now that no matter how downtrodden someone like Ellie might be, at least somewhere a piece of her is running free. Somewhere that wild and innocent part of her spirit is being preserved with those of the wolf and the rattlesnake and all the other creatures whose spirit-bones *La Huesera* collects from the desert — deserts natural, and of our own making.

Spirit-bones. Collected and preserved, nurtured in the belly of the Bone Woman's song, until we learn to welcome them upon their terms, rather than our own.

(The idea of *La Huesera* comes from the folklore of the American Southwest. My thanks to Clarissa Pinkola Estés for making me aware of the tale.)

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Grania Davis last appeared in F&SF with the wonderful cover story to our March, 1992 issue, "The Tree of Life." Since then, the story has been reprinted in Polish — a fitting tribute to a tale with an Eastern European setting.

Grania does travel a lot, and her traveling inspires much of her fiction. Her novel, The Rainbow Annals, is based on Tibetan legends. Moonbird uses Balinese myths. Marco Polo and the Sleeping Beauty, written in collaboration with Avram Davidson, is set in China.

The following story, "ChronCorp," is based on the experience of traveling. Anywhere. Any time.

ChronCorp

By Grania Davis

FAXET FROM CEO HARALD Nakai to ChronCorp shareholders: "The Public Utility Commission has granted another rate increase, and we expect another banner year. *Which* year is your choice. *Chronets* are standard features in more homes, as safe and convenient time travel gains wider acceptance. Do you long for that little seafood restaurant that closed decades ago? Simply enter your Chronet Credit Code, and enjoy that multi-course abalone dinner for $5.98 (Old USD).

"Travel to the distant past remains more complex, due to instabilities in the Culman Wormhole Matrix. Yet our adventure travel division, TimeTours, is growing by leap-years and bounds, carving out new adventures to...anytime. TimeTour Groups have recently departed to the exciting Mayan New Year celebrations, and the inspiring Exodus from Egypt. Consult your TimeTours brochure, and join us...sometime."

Faxet to CEO Harald Nakai from Andrea Liang, Chair of TimeTours. "Do not panic, Harald. I repeat, *do not panic.* The Exodus Tour Group has

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been slightly misrouted, due to a sudden surge of instability in the Culman Wormhole Matrix. They are not lost. I repeat, *not lost.* They are experiencing a brief delay, normal in any travel situation, while we send an expert tour operator to round them up. Relatives and Significant Others were told that communication is delayed while the Exodus Group observes Moses on Sinai. The media must not be told. I repeat, *do not tell the media.* Our #1 tour operator is going through the wormhole to fetch them."

Lefty was surprised by a ring from the *voxet,* which invaded her audio-space. She was tempted to let her robet answer, but intuition told her to accept the connection. "Lefty here."

"Left, I'm so glad you answered. It's Andrea with a grosso problem."

"What's the problem? I'm not scheduled to leave for the Nurses Tour of the Crimean War until next week."

"Forget the Crimean War. We need you now. We've got a group lost in the wormhole matrix..."

"That's no problem," said Lefty. "That's a disaster."

Excerpt from a ChronCorp brochure: "Wormholes, the virtuous micro-tunnels between universes that link time and space, were known for decades. However, it wasn't until the Nobel Prize winning Culman Theory and Patents of the early twenty-first century that basic time-travel applications were developed. Because of the virtuosity and instability of the wormhole matrix, the technology advanced slowly toward significant journeys through time. At that point, ChronCorp was formed as a public utility, to offer practical and safe time-travel to consumers."

Z*A*P! Just like the old superheroes, Lefty whisked through the wormhole matrix, zapped through time and space in nanoseconds — and emerged with a splitting headache.

I'm getting too old for this, she decided. Wonder Woman gradually transformed into Wonder Matron, her shiny black hair streaked with gray, unable to leap tall buildings in a single bound because her blood pressure goes out of whack.

Perhaps the worst part of time-travel, she thought, was after crossing the virtuous millennia in moments, she was now crawling along at the pace of

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public transit of the past—in this case a donkey cart. Clip...clop...clip...clop. She could have zapped through virtuous centuries with each blipping clip and clop.

Lefty adjusted her all-purpose head-to-toe traveler's cloak, and looked around. She was in a caravan of overburdened donkey carts trudging across a scrubby desert ringed by hills, toward water that shimmered invitingly in the hot and dusty air. There was a babble of excited talk, and the *Lingo-Meter* (pat. pending), which was disguised as her wrist bangle, registered old Hebrew and Aramaic. So far, so good. Perhaps she had connected with the Exodus Tour Group as they approached the Red Sea for the low-tide crossing.

Clip...clop...clip...clop...

But no such blipping luck. This scrubby landscape wasn't the bleak and barren desert of Sinai, and both the Lingo-Meter and her ring-shaped *Chronpass* showed that the virtuous time-space was centuries future-side of the Exodus track. The wormhole matrix was as unstable as the weather. Storms could blow the time-line way off track, and could melt the matrix like jello in the sun.

"Blip old Culman and his theory and patents," she glumphed.

If she wasn't in synch with the Exodus time-tourists, then where was this sunlit sea? Clip...clop...clip...clop...

Someone spoke to her directly. It was an old man with a random assortment of teeth and facial hair, and something that looked like a giant diaper wrapped around his head. She twisted her wrist bangle to turn up the volume of the Lingo-Meter. "The Rebel of Nazareth will be speaking on the beach. They say he can perform miracles."

The Rebel of Nazareth! She had slipped through a worn out wormhole into last season's highly popular Messiah Tour. Wormholes are like habits. The more they are used, the easier they are to slip into. The Exodus wormhole was still new and tight as stiff boots. The Messiah wormhole was like an old pair of comfortable slippers — more than a thousand years off the mark. Clip...clop...clip...clop...

After endless clips and clops, they reached the shore of what Lefty now realized was the Sea of Galilee. There were about a dozen long-haired surfer types on the sunny beach, with their diapers folded into adorable little bikinis.

One of the surfers, with blazing dark eyes and high-voltage charisma, was

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rapping to the others about love and peace, and all that quaint old time hippie-speak.

"That's beautiful, man," said another surfer, a heavy-set guy with a bushy black beard.

"Yeah, beautiful, man," echoed the others.

"I wanted to share that with you," said the charismatic surfer, wiping the sweat off his brow. The sky suddenly darkened with a passing squall that whipped white-caps in the placid sea. "Let's hit the surf!" he cried.

He plunged into the choppy water. The crowd of non-swimmers on shore watched in awe, as he deftly stroked across the sparkling sea. Then he turned around to face the crowd, a magnetic dot way off-shore, and began to tread water with his arms outstretched joyously to the stormy sky.

"He walks!" cried the old man beside Lefty. "He walks on water. It's a miracle!"

The others in donkey carts and on the shore took up the cry. "He walks on water — it's a miracle!" they cried.

Only Lefty realized that the surfers were missing members of a Messiah TimeTours group that had gone astray.

After Lefty rounded up the reluctant surfers and sent them home to Los Angeles through the wormhole matrix, she considered what to do next. How could she zap through the matrix to the Exodus track?

FAXET TO CEO Harald Nakai from Andrea Liang, Chair of TimeTours: "Great news, Harald, I repeat, *Great News.* Fortunately our #1 tour operator has found the thirteen young time-nerds who wandered away from a recent messiah tour. We feared they had been taken by time-terrorists. Instead they were found surfing at Galilee. Unfortunately, a little water-treading stunt by their leader has caused a permanent blip in the time-line, leading to unfounded rumors of water-walking miracles. Fortunately, these tales blend seamlessly into the Messianic mythos, so no real harm has been done. Unfortunately, unstable weather in the wormhole matrix has prevented our operator from locating the missing Exodus Group. But fortunately, she is zapping in on them."

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Z*A*P! Out of the donkey cart and into a steam bath, or so it felt to Lefty as she attempted a past-zap into the Exodus track. The mechanism was simple enough. Lefty worked the controls on the *Chronet* that hung like a little pendant around her neck. This would allow her virtuous sub-atomic particles to stream into the time-line through the wormhole matrix. Meanwhile, her physical atoms and molecules remained safely behind, suspended at the ChronCorp Departure Lounge. This virtuous rather than cellular reality was what made time-travel in the wormhole matrix so safe. Nothing could harm you — unless you got lost.

Was she lost? A troop of dark-skinned Egyptian soldiers in sweet little linen kilts marched just up ahead. But the climate wasn't right. Too hot and sticky, and the vegetation had a tropical motif, with lush flowering vines and graceful coconut palms, not the stubby date palms of the dry Nile Valley.

Her ring-shaped *Chronpass* indicated that the time-line was almost on track. She was somewhere in Africa, during the early new Kingdom, when the Egyptian capital of Thebes had reached its height. This was when the ancient Hebrews were immigrant workers in the blazing heat, at the vast tomb construction sites. But where in Africa...and what year? Were the Hebrews still slaves in Egypt, or were their masters weakened by the plagues and calamities that allowed the slaves to escape? The dials on the Chronpass wavered uneasily. The wormhole weather was still dangerously unstable.

Trudge...trudge...trudge...

Lefty turned up the air-condet, shaped like a clasp of her all-purpose traveler's cloak. She trudged among the crowd of camp followers, behind the tireless Egyptians who marched through the overheated jungle. She peered ahead as they approached a village of conical grass huts on stilts. It looked too tropical for arid Egypt. Trudge...trudge...in the steamy heat.

Tribesfolk scurried down the reed ladders of the conical huts, like termites escaping a disturbed mound. They were dark and sturdy as rainforest trees, and they wore cute beaded mini-skirts around their midsections. They gathered in loose formation to face the oncoming Egyptian soldiers. Lefty anxiously turned up the volume of her Lingo-Meter. Would the soldiers attack the village?

"Greetings from the Queen of Two Lands, Upper and Lower Egypt."

"Greetings from the Queen of Punt," replied a dignified old man who spoke for the villagers.

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Blip, she had gone past-track around two hundred years! Instead of the Exodus, Lefty had stumbled on Queen Hatshepsut's expedition to the land of Punt on the Somali coast. The Egyptian envoys were sent to Punt with lavish gifts for the ailing queen, and to fetch potted incense trees back to Egypt.

TimeTours can get interesting, thought Lefty, as she watched the Egyptians hand out gifts to the awed villagers. There was a great stir in the crowd, which parted to allow a majestic figure to enter. It was the Queen of Punt, grossly swollen with elephantiasis, but still seated proudly on a stretcher carried by four fine men (Lefty noted with approval). The queen wore a soft barkcloth sarong wrapped around her massive body.

"How is my sister Queen of Egypt in the Narrow Land of Many-Headed Gods?" asked the Queen of Punt.

"Queen Hatshepsut of the Dual Crowned Land of the Lotus and the Papyrus sends greetings and gifts to the mighty Queen of Punt. She wishes to borrow a few potted cuttings of your incense trees for the garden of her royal tomb."

"You Egyptians think of nothing but your tombs. You die for fun, a funeral is your favorite party. While I battle to stay alive. Of course my sister queen can have seven cuttings for her garden; now let me see the gifts."

Lefty sadly realized that she had the cure for the queen's ailment in her brooch-shaped all-purpose medical kit. Yet she knew she could not heal the queen without blipping the time-line. Time-travel can sometimes be frustrating.

The queen had turned her attention from her gripes to her gifts, which were heaped before her. Beside the queen sat her pet sphinx.

One of the great discoveries of time-travel was finding which legendary creatures were real. So far ChronCorp's Environmental Division had located unicorns, dragons, and sphinxes, though all were rare. Sphinxes were highly intelligent creatures that could learn human speech. They had weak limbs that limited their mobility, but they lived a very long time.

"Nice piece of merchandise," commented the sphinx to the Queen of Punt, as they examined a white linen sarong.

Lefty heard a buzz in her earring-shaped *voxet*, then an anxious voice came on-line. "Lefty, it's Andrea here. Have you found them yet? Their Significant Others are getting nervous!"

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"Sorry, I got de-tracked in Punt."

"Well, that's lovely, dear. I hope you're enjoying the exotic scenery. Maybe we'll add it to our itinerary, and serve tropical fruit punches with little umbrellas. But meanwhile, Lefty dear, let's remember that ChronCorp has an urgent job for you. I repeat, *urgent.*"

"Right, Andrea, I'm zapping out of here," glumphed Lefty. Working for ChronCorp had lots in common with slavery in Egypt.

"I'll bite the gold to make sure it's real, and if not I'll bite the Egyptian envoy," said the sphinx to the Queen of Punt.

Z*A*P! LEFTY returned to her own time-line — more or less. The unstable wormhole weather was causing chronic chaos. She stood on a move-way in a bustling city, domed to keep out harmful ultra-rays. Throngs of Happy-Campers lived in metered spaces on the street, beneath luxurious residential towers. An immense viewer flashed the latest news-breaks.

"The United Provinces Medical Society, meeting at the capital of Niagara Falls, discussed the alarming spread of the new respiratory-borne immune-suppressant virus." The viewer showed a group of men and women in white powdered wigs, beneath the Union Jack flag.

Blip! Lefty realized she'd slipped into an alternate wormhole, where the United States and Canada were still united under British rule. This alternate future-track had been a prime TimeTours destination, until a mutated HIV respiratory virus had slipped through the matrix and wiped out most of the population. The wormhole was sealed off as a dangerous dead-end zone,but the unstable weather must have torn it open. "Gotta zap out of here fast," glumphed Lefty.

Z*A*P! Like Alice through the looking glass, Lefty attempted another past-zap, and was caught in a swirling timephoon, hurtling violently through virtuous space-time.

She landed briefly on a rocky cliff overlooking a cold northern sea — the land of Cornwall during the reign of King Ort, according to a gossipy witch.

She stood on the seventh tier of Mt. Meru, far above the clouds, and watched a white monkey warrior lead his mischievous troop of chattering apes against demon hordes, while swarms of menacing crows screamed

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overhead.

She saw the victorious Confederate soldiers burning Boston.

Lefty was getting time-sick. Her head ached, and her stomach churned as if she might lose her face any moment.

"I'm getting too old for this. I want a desk job," said Lefty.

She tried to stabilize her Chronet with weary eyes that had been gen-altered to subliminal glints of pink and lavender, to match the bodysuit she wore under her traveling cloak. These were the colors of the ChronCorp advertising logo.

Lefty took a deep breath, and aimed once again for the Exodus track, where the missing time-tourists were still trapped in the highly unstable wormhole matrix.

Z*A*P! Lefty past-zapped to a lush desert oasis of date palms and fragrant vines watered by sweet springs, where shepherds grazed flocks of sheep and goats on scrubby hillsides. Ahead loomed the great stone walls of a bustling city, near a river crossing.

Lefty's Chronpass showed that she had finally found the Exodus wormhole, future-side of the Sinai brush-fire. The city that lay ahead was Jericho, a rich oasis strategically located on the Jordan River, and the scene of armed conflict for thousands of years.

Even as she watched, a scruffy band of wanderers approached the massive walls of the old city. It was the grimy ancient Hebrews coming out of slavery in Egypt, and exile in the barren desert, to reclaim their ancestral homeland of milk and honey.

But where were the missing time-tourists? Were they still lost and wandering in the vast Sinai desert? Lefty drew her hooded cloak around her, and joined the shepherds on a hillside overlooking the scene.

The ranks of tattered Hebrews grew larger, until they became a substantial army approaching the city. When the sun set behind the distant Mountains of Moab, the people of mighty Jericho anxiously retreated behind the stone walls and barred the arched gates. The shabby band of wanderers lit their torches, and marched around the walls of the city like an inexorable army of ants. They jeered and cheered, and marched round and round, while the people of the city fearfully waited behind the great walls.

Then the ancient Hebrews suddenly produced an awesome array of ram's

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horns and trumpets, and began to play the wildest and sweetest jazz that Lefty had ever heard, as they marched and danced around the stone walls of Jericho. Wild jazz...weird and wonderful jazz...singing and stomping jazz...dancing and prancing jazz around the old city walls. The frenzied Hebrews weren't marching and shouting with rage. They were singing and dancing with joy at the return to their ancestral homeland where the desert bloomed.

Lefty spied a small group of people peering over the city walls. They wore traveler's cloaks just like hers — *the time-tourists!* But why were they *inside* the walls? Lefty turned up her Lingo-Meter and tried to hear what they said above the wild jazz.

"Come on, Harriet! They're doing Hebrew folk-dancing. Let's join the fun." The adventurous time-tourists began to clamber down the rock walls — then rough hands pulled them back up.

"Not allowed to join dancing, only allowed to take flash-holographs," said an angry voice in heavily accented English. "Pictures. You must take plenty pictures!"

"I don't tip pushy guides," glumphed Harriet, one of the missing time-tourists.

Lefty realized that the tourists had been kidnaped by time-terrorists posing as tour guides. The terrorists were trying to blip the time-line by using hostages, with all their flash-holo gear, to frighten the ancient Hebrews with sudden flashing lights.

If the Hebrews were driven away from Jericho, then they would lose their claim to their homeland, and all of history would change. The Hebrews would have become an obscure nomadic tribe in the desert, and Christianity would never have been born. Eurocentric history would be blipped forever. Lefty had to act fast to stop this terrible chronologic disaster.

The brave tourists still didn't realize that they were in grave danger. They insisted on joining the wild dance around the walls. The terrorists' voices grew angry. They could lose their tempers and blip the tourists unless she got to them first. Lefty ran down the hillside to an arched wooden gate, and smashed it open with the Lazyboy-Lazerbolt hidden in her belt buckle. She raced through the maze of narrow city lanes, until she found the terrorists demanding that the alarmed tourists aim their flashers at the Hebrews.

Lefty threw open her traveler's cloak to reveal the blazing pink and lavender bodysuit of a ChronCorp tour operator. "I'm taking over this tour now," she said, aiming the Lazerbolt belt buckle at the cringing and pleading terrorists. Lefty coded her Chronet to blip the terrorists into a chronologic

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worm-loop — where they could do no more harm.

"Let's join the homecoming dance," she said.

The time-tourists cheered, and raced out the gate to join the trumpeting jazz dance that wove joyously round and round the strategic walls of Jericho.

The time-tourists were saved. And when the people of mighty Jericho heard the ancient Hebrews dancing and rejoicing at the return to their beloved homeland, they began to tap their toes to the wild and wicked, sweet and sinuous, dancing and prancing jazz beat. And soon the people of Jericho were dancing inside the walls, to welcome the shabby Hebrews and the rescued tourists who danced outside.

The band leader, Joshua, blew his heavenly ram's horn with gladness in this lush land of plenty and peace. Six more ram's horns echoed his joyful blast.

But the jumping and thumping of all those stamping and shouting dancers caused the city walls to shake and quake. The mud-mortar that held the stones together began to crumble from all the good vibes.

The great walls shuddered and shook, creaked and cracked, leaped like rams and skipped like lambs. Then everyone watched in wonder as the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

"Poor construction," said one of the tourists.

"So who needs walls, anyway?" asked a young shepherd.

"Come on, gang, the party's over. It's time to zap home through the wormhole matrix," said Lefty to the tourists.

"But we're having such a great time. Can't we stick around to see what happens next?" asked Harriet.

"The wormhole weather is too unstable. Only sphinxes can wait long enough to always see what happens next. But the new TimeTours brochure will be sent to you, and the David and Goliath stoning match is scheduled soon."

"Great! I love getting stoned," said one of the tourists.

They joined hands to avoid being separated, while Lefty worked her Chronet.

"I'm hungry," said Harriet's husband. "Could we stop at the Last Supper on our way home?"

"Time will tell," said Lefty.

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Marina Fitch lives in Santa Cruz, California, with her new husband, writer Mark Budz. Although she has written a number of excellent short stories, including "Jessica" (August, 1992), and "The Ghost on Christmas Eaves" (January, 1993), she has turned her attention to novels. Still, we manage to pry a story from her now and then.

"The Silent Treatment" is a wonderful, modern fantasy about a woman, a man, and a colony of ants.

The Silent Treatment

By Marina Fitch

SHERYL CROSSED HER arms and stared at the column of ants marching up the wall from behind the cookstove. It looked as if someone had brushed the wall with molasses, except that the molasses dripped upward, thickening at the base of the overhead cupboards. A trickle veered off and flowed toward the sink. With a shake of her blonde head — to dislodge imaginary ants — Sheryl stepped closer. The column was more like a freeway, the ants coming and going, tailgating one another in their persistence.

Sheryl peered into the sink. Ants ran along the faucet and pooled in the drain below. She turned on the water. Twenty-some little bodies swirled to their deaths, their imaginary screams drowned out by the crash of her husband Jake's rock-and-roll station. She turned off the water, then the radio. Crossing the room to the front door, she opened it and stepped

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onto the porch.

Sheryl leaned against the doorframe. She hugged herself, massaging the chill from her arms. Before her the redwoods marched to the sea like a troop of ants — a wide swath of green, individuals lost in the press of tree to tree. Somewhere down there, in one of the tucks of the mountain, Jake rattled along in the Bronco, headed toward the market and the organic gardening center. She glanced at the wheelbarrow parked at the head of the driveway. A sheet of ice lay in the wheelbarrow's bed, despite the afternoon sun. Sheryl shivered and went inside.

The ants paced in greater numbers.

Gingerly, Sheryl went to the cookstove and stood on tiptoe to open the overhead cupboard. An ant crawled onto her hand. She flipped it off. The cupboard held nothing but gardening books, cookbooks, and a first-aid kit. Although they avoided the books, the ants swarmed over the first-aid kit. Sheryl pushed the cupboard shut. She flipped three more ants from her fingers.

"What do you want with that?" Sheryl asked the ants. "There's nothing in that thing but bandages and pills. And there's nothing in the sink. What are you finding?"

Jake would be furious. When they married six months ago, he told her to keep things immaculate, or the insect population would move in. And now they had — at least ten thousand strong. "You invited them in," he'd say. Then he'd stop talking to her for a few days. Of course, he'd already stopped talking to her before he left for the market.

She had to get rid of them before he got home. It usually took him three hours to go downtown and back — that gave her two hours. She reached for the sponge. She rinsed five ants from it, sprayed it with the homemade vinegar-and-lemon cleanser, then wiped up the trail of ants from the cookstove to the sink. The sponge blackened with crushed bodies. She rinsed the sponge again. Before the last dead ant swept down the drain, a bridge of ants detached itself from the cookstove-to-cupboard path and marched to the sink.

Sheryl set down the sponge. "What did you think you were doing?" Jake would say. "We're in the middle of a drought, on a well that's getting lower by the day, and you're wasting water flushing ants down the drain? Just how stupid are you, Sheryl?"

Sheryl called her mother. Her chest tightened at the sound of her

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mother's voice. "Mother, I need your help," she said.

"Help? I thought you and Mr. Organic were self-sufficient."

"We are, in most ways, but I don't know how to deal with this. Mother, the kitchen is full of ants."

"Is that all? It's the cold. Just spray them. Honestly, Sheri, are you really a half-wit? Get out the Raid —"

"Mother, you know I can't do that." Sheryl calmed herself, hoping to quiet the quaver in her voice. "Mother, you know Jake doesn't allow me to use poisons of any kind. I need some natural way to get rid of them."

"Well, then, get out the bathroom cleanser and mop them up."

"A *natural* way, Mother."

Sheryl relaxed at her mother's exasperated sigh. "Where are they?" her mother said.

"Behind the cookstove."

"Get a couple of traps and put them behind the stove. They're poisonous only to the ants. Besides, if the traps are behind the stove, Mr. Natural won't even see them."

"But if he finds them —" Sheryl took a deep breath. "Mother, this morning he found a can of mosquito spray I hid in my underwear drawer last summer. He went crazy." Sheryl shuddered, her shoulders curling inward. "Mother, if he talks to me at all in the next week —"

"If that monster lays a hand on you —"

"Mother!"

Silence stretched between them. Sheryl glanced at the ants scuttling between the sink and the cookstove. "Mother," she said softly, "can you think of anything?"

"Try vinegar. And sometime while he's out, get down off that mountain and get some traps."

Sheryl pinched the bridge of her nose. "We've got only the Bronco, Mother. The clutch went out on the Toyota."

"You mean to tell me you're trapped up there, thirty miles from nowhere, without a car? Sheri, honey —"

"Twelve miles, Mother. Only twelve."

"It's not right! You tell that, that *jerk* to get you a car —"

"Mother, it's not that" — she unplugged the handset — "bad." She waited a few seconds, then plugged it in again. Her mother wouldn't call back: she was used to being cut off by the lousy phone service to the

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mountains.

Sheryl went out on the porch again and peered down the mountainside. Here and there the driveway shone through the trees. No Bronco, no Jake. She hurried inside.

She surveyed the kitchen. A new route led to the drawer that held candles, matches, flashlights, screwdrivers, and the spare hammer. She tugged it open and peered inside. Ants flooded the drawer, flowing over the sides. She removed it and set it on the porch.

She returned to the kitchen. The ants hadn't discovered the food cupboard — yet. Sheryl opened the cupboards and surveyed the plastic containers and boxes of grains, dried vegetables, and herbs. The ants might not be able to get into the containers. She sighed. Better to be sure, she decided. She moved everything into the refrigerator, then wiped the cupboards with vinegar.

At the cookstove, she soaked the sponge with more vinegar. She inhaled the vapor and coughed until her eyes watered. She then mowed down the ants with her sponge. The ants said nothing, just like Jake when he was angry.

"Won't talk to me, huh?" Sheryl said. She leaned into the sponge.

Within ten minutes the ants disappeared. Sheryl rinsed the sponge and set it on the drainboard. On the wall behind the cookstove, three ants raced upward like black skyrockets against a yellow sky.

Sheryl stoked the woodstove, then sat at the table and waited for Jake.

Dusk overtook the day. Sheryl switched on the kitchen light. A thin line of ants, two abreast, darted from the cookstove to the cupboards. Sheryl ignored them. Evening overpowered the dusk, and a chill settled on the cabin. Sheryl put on a sweater, then fed the woodstove again. At seven, she heated some soup, ate, and cleaned up. At nine, she banked the coals, drew the rice-paper shades against the near-full moon, and went to bed.

She slept fitfully, waking every time she turned over. At one point, she flung herself toward the window, only to catch her breath with a start. Someone sat, hunched forward, in Jake's easy chair, silhouetted against the shade.

Childhood survival tactics filled her mind. If she lay still, perhaps the person wouldn't see her and would leave without hurting her. Then reason took over. It was Jake; it had to be. She peered at the figure. It turned a little, its profile stark against the backlit shade. Hatchet nose,

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thick lower lip, receding chin — she sat up. "Jake? Jake, honey, come to bed."

He shifted to face her, but said nothing. Sheryl bunched the covers at her throat. "I'm sorry," she said. "I just . . . you remember how bad the mosquitoes were last summer. I couldn't handle it. I could never get the smudge lit in time. They were all over me the minute I set foot outside. I used it only when you weren't here. Just a few times."

She waited, hopeful, but no response came. "I was careful picking it out," she said. "I bought it at the pet store. It's all natural ingredients — it's not toxic to animals or people, just bugs."

Jake leaned back, disappearing into the wings of the easy chair. Sheryl twisted the sheets. "Please, Jake, come to bed?"

The quiet deepened. He must really be angry, Sheryl thought. He had never refused to come to bed. Not even the time she swore, and he put dish soap on her tongue. She burrowed under the covers. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

She covered her head, her ears straining for a footfall or a rustle of denim, but heard nothing. When the darkness gave way to the scantest of sunlight, Jake was already gone.

Warmth fled from her as she pulled on her clothes. She hurried to the woodstove and prodded the fire to life. Opening the shades, she peered out onto a white world. A thick layer of frost coated the garden, the porch, the drive — Sheryl's heart sank. There was no sign of the Bronco, not even tire tracks. She stoked the fire. Then she turned to the cookstove.

A wriggling river of ants flowed toward the cupboard, one thin tributary leading to the sink. Sheryl sighed, braced herself, and reached for the kettle. When the kettle whistled, Sheryl poured the hot water into a cup, fished out two ants with her spoon, then inserted a tea bag.

After breakfast, she went to check on the garden. Her footprints followed her across the white ground. She stopped at the chicken-wire gate. Just inside the fence, broccoli slumped on bent stalks, leaves limp despite the freeze. There was no need to go further. If the broccoli had succumbed to the frost, then none of the other vegetables — not even the brussel sprouts — stood a chance. Sheryl zipped her jacket to her chin and went to check the orchard.

Lemons and oranges glistened with frost. The pomegranates retained their matte texture, but were equally frozen. Sheryl touched the apple, the

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plum, and the cherry trees, examining each carefully. Spring alone would tell whether any of them lived. The chill seeped through Sheryl's coat. She hurried indoors and brewed another cup of tea.

Her hands wrapped around the mug, she stared out the window. Who would have believed one can of bug spray could make Jake so angry? she thought. Perhaps the frost damage would deflect his temper. He'd have to talk to her to tell her how they were going to salvage the garden, wouldn't he?

An ant dropped from Sheryl's bangs. After squishing the ant, she brushed at her hair with her hands, then glared at the platoon parading behind the cookstove

"I want to hear a human voice!" she said. She pushed herself from her chair and turned on the radio. After a moment's hesitation, she switched from Jake's rock-and-roll to her favorite noncommercial station. Mance Lipscomb wailed the blues.

She listened all morning, uncertain what to do. It was too cold to work outside. The garden was beyond help at this point. Unless she wanted to scour ants, cleaning the kitchen made no sense. She stoked the woodstove and let the radio sing to her.

A cup of tea later, she discovered that the ants had claimed the bathroom for their own. In the medicine cabinet, the conquerors had taken bottles of aloe vera and homemade salves prisoner. Sheryl slammed the cabinet door. She stomped some of the ants around the base of the toilet, then rinsed a few down the drain. She returned to the kitchen and brewed another cup of tea.

She smiled. "I like this," she told the radio. "I like having a chance to sit." An ant crawled across the table. She set her cup on it.

By noon, she decided to heck with Jake. She pulled out her stitchery. "There's nothing else to do," she said, "and if you're going to leave me alone for a day, then I can fritter away my time any way I want."

When the late-afternoon sun burnished the frost, Sheryl turned down the radio and went outside again. Peering down the mountain, she listened for the Bronco growling up the hill, but not a sound met her ears. She went inside. As soon as her hands warmed, she called Jake's friends.

"Haven't seen him," Nick said. "You doing all right up there?"

"Hell, he hasn't talked to me since we had that argument about whether or not to compost banana peels," Roy said. "Listen, tell him to call

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when he gets in, O.K.?"

Zack snorted. "Pulling his famous silent act again? Shit. Most babies learn to talk before they're two. You'd think a man of thirty-five could figure it out."

Sheryl held the phone to her chest. She lifted the handset and began to dial her mother, then hung up. Why not enjoy this? She'd never really been alone before. It was nice not having someone watching over her, reminding her how stupid she was. Whistling to herself, Sheryl fixed her favorite tofu scramble for dinner, stirring in an intolerable (according to Jake) amount of cayenne. As she savored a mouthful, she wondered if ambrosia tasted this good.

The evening passed too quickly. She curled up with a mystery novel. At ten, she stretched and rose to get ready for bed. Bemused, she wondered when she had stopped listening for Jake. It was a little like the big debates she and her friends had had in high school. How long do you wait for someone before you figure he's stood you up? How late is *late*, and how late is *forget this jerk*? Sheryl giggled. "Forget this Jake!" she said aloud.

Before snuggling down in bed, she checked the bedroom for ants. A thin caravan explored the closet, apparently interested in the blankets. She let them be. She crawled into bed, then turned off the lamp. She fell asleep instantly.

With a cry, she woke. Tears seeped from the corners of her eyes. Her heart pounded. She recalled only fragments of the nightmare. Jake stood over her, shaking orange branches at her, the frozen fruit still clinging to the twigs. She seemed to remember thrusting him away from her, ants darting from her hands to his chest as she pushed. Yes, and then the ants crawled over his face, tugging back the skin, and he became her mother....

She started to nestle down again, then stopped. Jake's silhouette darkened the shade. She stared at him a minute, maybe two, then said, "Where have you been?"

He didn't answer.

"I called around looking for you," she said. "Jake, I don't like the way you're treating me. I told you I was sorry."

He turned, his profile guillotine-sharp against the moon-backed shade.

"Talk to me!" Sheryl screamed. She ground her fists into the mattress. "Talk to me, or I'm going to — to —" The dream image returned to her suddenly. She sat up, as tall as she could. "You're — you're just like my

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mother. I married my mother! You both refuse to talk *to* me . . . you both refuse to listen . . . you both . . . I don't care if you're listening or not. I'm going to talk, and *I'm* going to listen!"

Jake sat perfectly still.

"My mother had me so conviced I wasn't capable of surviving, I lived with her till I was twenty-six. Then I met you. And I felt comfortable with you, because you treated me just like she did! Only, you didn't *tell* me I was stupid, you *showed* me, with your silent treatment and your glares and your — your fucking disappearances!"

Sheryl stiffened, expecting Jake to rise from the chair and drag her to the sink. A few seconds passed. The relief fueled her anger, and she leaned forward, groping for the light switch. "To hell with you, Jake! I don't deserve this! To *hell* with you!"

She fumbled the light on, then shrank back. No one sat in the chair, just a huge, writhing statue of ants.

As she watched, the "statue" rose from the chair and crooked its finger in a "come with me" gesture before it collapsed from the head down. Soon "Jake" was nothing but a puddle of ants rippling at the foot of the easy chair. Sheryl got out of bed slowly, put on her bathrobe and slippers, and crossed to the window. A trail of ants led away from the chair. Sheryl followed. The ants trooped out of the bedroom, through the kitchen, and out the door. The ants in the kitchen scuttled down the walls and cupboards to join them.

Sheryl stopped, grasping the doorframe. All this time the ants had been streaming indoors. . . . Why were they rushing outside now?

The ants branched and flowed around her feet, circling her, as if insisting she come with them. An urgency filled her, a need to know where they were going and why they wanted her. She grabbed her jacket, tugging it on over the bathrobe as she flung open the door. She switched on the porch light, got the flashlight from the emergency drawer, then followed the ants. At the edge of the porch, she switched on the flashlight, but its beam vanished in the bright moonlight.

The ants swept down the driveway, a floe of glistening black. She followed, pulling the jacket close against the chill, wondering how long it would take her to freeze out here. The ants spilled down the gravel and dirt of the driveway, silent as the cold. Sheryl slid, righted herself, and continued on.

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Her fingers grew numb. She shut off the useless flashlight and left it on the side of the driveway. Cramming her hands in her pockets, she chafed her fingers against her palms to warm them. She thought about turning back, but the ants swarmed over her feet and ankles, the weight of them urging her forward. She walked on, past the pile of stones Jake had placed as a marker one mile from the house, and stumbled on the lip of the pavement at the end of the dirt part of the drive. Just beyond the hairpin turn, the entire troop of ants veered off the shoulder and down the mountainside.

Sheryl slid on a sheet of black ice, stopped, then clambered down the slope after them. Broken trees and bushes littered the descent. At first, she thought, "Ants," then smiled grimly to herself. Not even a crush of ants could do this much damage — but a Bronco might.

The truck lay twisted and smashed against a tree. It almost looked as if the vehicle were embracing the tree, so tightly were the two pressed together. Sheryl shuddered and retreated a few steps. If Jake was in there, she didn't want to see him. After two days of bitter cold, he might be well preserved, but he would still be mangled. Then she saw the ants, not streaming toward the car, but toward a knot of berry vines several feet away.

There she found him, buried under a squirming mound of ants. She knelt beside him. Beneath the insects, leaves and bits of cloth crisscrossed Jake's body. As she leaned forward, the ants parted to reveal his face. His eyelids flickered open. Whether the ants opened those eyes and the moonlight reflected in them, or whether Jake looked up at her, Sheryl couldn't be sure. Then the eyelids closed. Sheryl flinched and drew back. The ants swarmed across his features, shrouding his face.

Sheryl hugged herself. Sharp, harsh whines rent the quiet; as in a dream, she realized they were coming from her own throat. She reached forward, brushing the ants from Jake's neck, and felt for a pulse. Miraculously, it was there, faint, but there; his skin was warm to the touch. She swallowed. "Dear God," she said.

She removed her jacket and draped it over him. The ants seeped from beneath the jacket's folds, the cloth blackened under the wriggling bodies. "Jake, honey, I'll get help," Sheryl said, rising on one knee.

Jake's voice rasped. "Where have you been?"

"Waiting for you."

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"Waiting for me. How did I get stuck with an idiot like you?"

"I thought you —" Sheryl stopped. He had turned his face away, refusing to listen. "Talk to me, Jake. If there's something you need now, before the ambulance comes, I need to know!"

He snorted weakly.

Sheryl hesitated, then pushed herself to her feet. Fear and anger shivered through her as she clambered back to the driveway. Let him pull this mute bit with the ambulance attendants, see where it got him, she thought, but please, let the ambulance get here in time. Sheryl walked quickly. At the mile marker, she broke into a jog.

Sweat filmed her skin. She struggled up the drive, her lungs aching with each breath. Get to the house, she told herself; get to the house and call for help. The current of ants surged beside her, no longer flowing downhill but up. She glanced over her shoulder. A few yards behind her, a lake of ants rippled, only a dribble leading into it from the direction of the accident. Sheryl sped up, her legs tightening in protest. A stitch wrenched her waist, collapsing her a little to the right. She ignored it, running faster.

At the sight of the house, she laughed with relief. A gasping cough nearly doubled her over. She tried to flex her fingers, but they curled uselessly into fists, cramped with cold. She staggered up the porch and threw herself at the door, turning the knob with her forearm. As the door opened, Sheryl stepped back. The floor was black with ants, the creatures spilling from every visible cupboard, wall, and corner. She waded through the milling throng.

She sat by the phone, rubbing her hands together, but her fingers refused to unbend. Hooking the receiver with the claw of her right hand, she flipped the handset to the table and punched 911 with a knuckle. Her right hand unfolded slowly. She picked up the handset as the emergency operator answered.

"There's been an accident," Sheryl said. "I need an ambulance and blankets. Lots of blankets. This is Sheryl Hahn. I'm at the last house on Derby Gulch Road, number 1268. . . . Yes, 1268. Hurry!"

Sheryl hung up the phone. She kneaded her left shoulder with her right hand. It had never occurred to her that something had happened to Jake. Like a mountain, she had thought Jake would always be there: strong, secure, and silent. She turned to the cookstove. The ants had dwindled by half. Not one scouted the food cupboards or the sink, although the trail from

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the bedroom boasted a few circling wanderers. The floor writhed with the crush of evacuees.

Sherly rose to her feet, shaking her head. "You can't abandon him now! He'll freeze —"

She ran to the bedroom and dressed quickly, pulling one of Jake's huge wool sweaters over two of her own. She opened the linen closet, grabbing the spare blankets. Not even a straggler wandered among the cotton folds. Sheryl darted to the kitchen. Like the bedroom, the kitchen bore no trace of the invaders.

Fear jolted through her; she snatched at the phone, then stared at the handset. Her mother would only say, "Sheri, you'll never make it up there by yourself. You're coming home with me." She set the phone on the table, fisting her hands. "I am surviving!" she shouted at the house. She — Sheryl — had survived two days without Jake or anyone telling her what to do, without the mute, suffocating security she had always known. Her heartbeat quickened. She pulled the first-aid kit from the cupboard and tucked it into the blankets. With a shove, she opened the door to the luminous gray dawn.

The blankets clutched to her chest, she trotted down the drive. The stitch chastened her with a pang. Sheryl stopped to snatch the flashlight in passing. The morning blossomed pink and clear around her so that the world filled with detail. She inhaled deeply through a rising sob — no ants trailed the driveway, either up or down.

At the one-mile marker, she slowed, plodding to a stop at the hairpin curve. She switched on the flashlight and left it in the middle of the drive, then descended the slope.

Jake lay still, her jacket stretched over him like a patch. The ants no longer veiled his face. Bruises and cuts webbed his pale features, his hatchet nose dulled by a red welt. Sheryl knelt beside him, setting the first-aid kit near his head, then tucked the blankets around him, afraid to take his pulse. She flinched when his head turned slowly to face her.

"I need to wait for the ambulance," she said, rising. "They won't know how to find you."

"Stay with me," he whispered.

Stunned, Sheryl sank to her knees. The dried blood that scabbed one of his cuts cracked, a clear ooze seeping from under its reddish shell. Sheryl hugged herself. If only she could be two places at once, here with him and

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there waiting for the ambulance. Birds punctuated the quiet. She studied Jake's face. The desire to be both places twisted through her, centered in the pit of her stomach. If she could just be sure the ambulance would find them —

Her shoulder blades contracted with a shiver as an itch spread from her ankles to her calves. She stared at the ants clothing her lower body. Was this what had happened to Jake? Had he *wanted* her help so badly that the ants sensed it? And had they then abandoned him — because his desire to be found had been fulfilled?

Sheryl closed her eyes and *wanted*. She imagined herself beside Jake and standing at the hairpin curve. Her eyes winced shut, and she doubled over, curling around the aching desire. The tickle of tiny feet swarmed up her neck, spreading to veil her face. Weighed down by the squirming bodies, her eyelids refused to open.

The itchy warmth seeped away. Sheryl blinked. A column of ants marched toward the road.

Hands shaking, she unfastened the lid of the first-aid kit. She dampened a cotton ball with antiseptic lotion and poked gently at the cuts on Jake's face.

She applied more lotion to the cotton ball. As she wiped the dried blood from his cheek, an engine murmured through the trees.

Sheryl took a fresh cotton ball from the first-aid kit and sponged away the excess lotion. The ambulance crept toward them, its growl rising and falling and rising again. The sound mapped the ambulance's progress in Sheryl's mind. She pictured each curve and dip. She took Jake's hand. "They're almost here. Just a few more minutes."

Tires crunched to a halt. Sheryl looked up. "I can't stay," she said, releasing Jake's hand.

"Sheryl. . . ."

A blue light strobed between the trees, eerie in the pale yellow morning. "Good God, what is it?" a man said.

A woman whistled. "A statue. We've got to get it off the road — it's raising its arm!"

"Penny, it's melting. . . ."

"Come on. I think we better see what it was pointing at."

Sheryl stood. "It's my turn to be silent now."

She scrambled past the battered carcass of the Bronco. Careful not to

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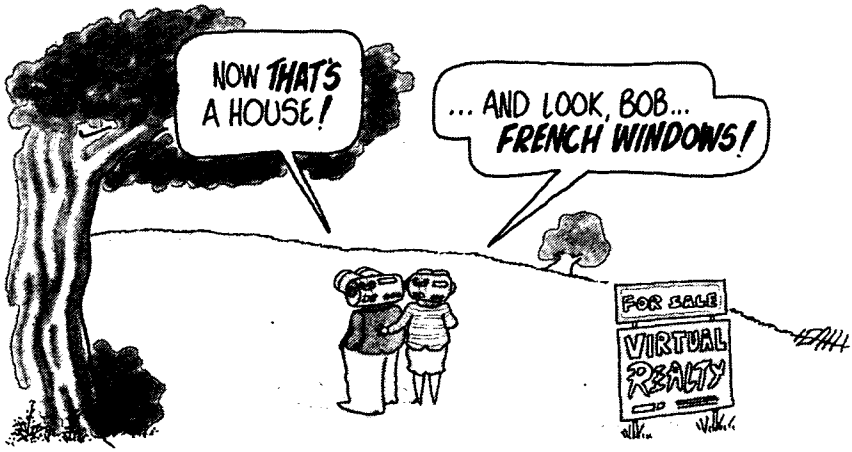
snap or trample the saplings and grasses, she climbed the slope toward the house. Shouts and exclamations erupted from the clearing behind her. Leaning against a redwood, Sheryl hesitated. She could ride with them to the hospital and then disappear. No — there would be questions and forms, people telling her what to do and how to feel. Some well-meaning soul would call her mother. Sheryl pushed on, darting between the trees and brambles. The silence between them — between her and Jake and her mother — began now. She would collect a few things at the house and call a cab. If the police met her at the house, well, she would allow them to take her to the hospital, slipping away at the first opportunity. Half of the money in the savings and checking accounts was hers, more than enough to help her get started somewhere else, someplace where she could be alone until she knew what she wanted and who she was.

She could stay at the house until Jake recovered — but would she be strong enough to escape the lulling security when he came home? She forced herself on.

Fear shivered through her like a chill. She clenched her jaw. "You can do it, Sheryl," she said. "*You*." She balled her hands and pulled them into the woolen sleeves to keep them warm. An ant crawled along the cuff. Sheryl stopped and held her hand to a berry vine until the ant wandered onto a leaf. Leaning forward, she struggled up the slope.



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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

A BLAST FROM THE PAST

A LITTLE OVER a decade ago, I worked for a short-lived popular technology magazine as their research editor. We published a lot of articles on the past, present, and future of practical science, but none elicited as much *concerned* response as a one-page piece we published on the old shoe-store fluoroscopes.

For those (many) of you too young to remember them, these were gimmick appliances placed in shoe stores at mid-century to allow kids to see the bones in their feet wiggle around within the outline of their new Buster Browns. As a novelty, they were — for a time — a real hit. The chance to see your own green glowing tootsies had as much drawing power as the promise of a new decoder ring.

The fluoroscope was *supposed* to provide practical guidance in choosing the best-fitting foot apparel, of course. Unfortunately, the old-fashioned metal gauge did a much better job at shoe-size measurement. The gauge took into account the flesh and muscle and other soft tissue that must rest comfortably between the bone and those saddle oxfords. The fluoroscope made the flesh invisible and immeasurable.

And — here's the kicker — it did it with radiation: x-rays. Several people who read that article, in 1982, contacted the magazine and expressed their fears. They remembered the many happy times they'd had zapping their feet (and probably their entire body from the waist down) with those fluoroscopes. And, looking back, they questioned whether birth defects in their family, and other health misfortunes, could have been caused by those carefree days of radiational fun.

The scientists we consulted said — not surprisingly — that such a dire

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effect was unlikely. (And probably these same guys say there is no residual danger in any of the "voluntary" radiation we were all exposed to during the fifties and sixties. Like those free chest x-rays thousands of Americans had one or more times a year, at work, at school, and at giant vans that pulled into their grocery store parking lots.)

Times have changed. We are now likely to challenge any doctor who casually suggests getting a few x-rays. (At least *I* am.) And most Americans are now prepared to believe the worst of large-scale technologies like atomic power plants and electrical high-power lines and even of small-scale consumer technologies like cellular phones and CRT computer monitors. (Call it paranoia, if you like. Most of us consider it legitimate anxiety.)

There was even more reason for legitimate anxiety back in the dawning of the atomic age. Problem was, mainstream culture seldom acknowledged our terror of nuclear annihilation and radiation poisoning. The media was too busy parroting all those "The atom is our friend" messages fed to them by Washington. I was born in D.C., and grew up within a few miles of the White House, and I remember being taught that even those of us near ground zero could survive an atomic bomb blast simply by crouching under our desks with our arms pulled over our heads.

Sounds damn silly today. But what did I know? I was just a kid. I was a kid who watched countless films in school about the exciting future of an atomic America. I was a kid who practiced "duck-and-cover" exercises every month at school, and collected cans for community "civil defense" shelters.

I was a kid not totally unlike the young leads in Joe Dante's recent film, *Matinee*.

What did any of us know? Precious little. We held on to the belief that what had happened to the Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been their own damn fault. (Less an act of man than the wrath of God.) We never believed that it could happen to us — until those few days in October of 1962 we now call the Cuban Missile Crisis. All of the fears our parents and teachers and leaders and media had never voiced, were finally said out loud that week.

Yet, in ways both subversive and downright silly, B horror/sf films had given voice to those fears for a decade. The Japanese (who had more atomic angst to work through than anyone) gave us a variety of vengeful critters, emissaries of a totally pissed Mother Nature. Foremost among

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these was Godzilla, that crusty, ancient dino who was awakened from his sleep by nuclear test blasts almost forty years ago, and who has been scaring (and, in his own perverse way, charming) us ever since.

American filmmakers produced their own menagerie of atomic mutants. Were we afraid of *Them!* You bet. (We weren't supposed to scream at the thought of a seriously schizoid world leader having the power to wipe us out, so we screamed over a giant ant heading in the direction of a nubile heroine instead.)

Joe Dante's recent film, *Matinee,* is about all of this. It is an extended "Wonder Years" episode about the desperate days when we all thought we were going to die. And it is also an affectionate salute to the men who made the B-movies we escaped into.

Charlie Haas (who appears in the film as a health teacher who's been well-trained in nutrition by the Beef Council) got the final writing credit for *Matinee.* And he deserves much credit, indeed. Mr. Haas doctored and elaborated upon the work of others (including the story-credited Jerico) with both art and enthusiasm. And Mr. Dante (*The Howling, Gremlins, Gremlins 2,* and episodes of TV's short-lived *Eerie, Indiana*), who knows better than most directors of his generation how to scare an audience without scarring them for life, was also the perfect director for this particular project.

First of all, Dante was himself trained in the B-movie biz. One of the score of directors who started off with Roger Corman, he worked on New World films like the *Jaws* parody, *Piranha* (1978) before moving on to horror-comedies with bigger budget. Dante's affection for the hero of *Matinee,* a schlockmeister named Lawrence Woolsey (John Goodman), is unmistakable.

Mr. Haas clearly modeled his moviemaker on the flamboyant William Castle. Like Goodman's Woolsey, the legendary director (producer, actor) was a portly showman, known for chomping on cigars and using gimmicks to thrill audiences. For *Macabre* (1958), Castle offered all moviegoers insurance policies in case they died of fright, and for *The Tingler* (1959), Castle made sure audiences actually tingled. He wired theater seats with buzzers.

Similar techniques are used by the fictional Woolsey in *Matinee.* Yet the film Woolsey premieres during the course of the movie, *Mant* ("Half Man — Half Ant — All Terror!"), has little in common with Castle's more traditional horror movies. As Joe Dante has admitted, Castle

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is only a partial model. Woolsey's character was also influenced by Jack Arnold *(The Incredible Shrinking Man, It Came from Outer Space)* and Dante's own mentor, Roger *(Little Shop of Horrors)* Corman.

A composite like that is certainly a larger-than-life figure. And I can't imagine anyone else doing the role with as much vitality and snake-oil showmanship as John Goodman. His Woolsey is a con-man in love with his con. Yes, he's a little crooked and a trifle sleazy, but he lives to see his audiences enjoy his shows. And to Woolsey, full enjoyment includes the right to trash a theater when you're not shrieking in sheer panic.

Anyone with any affection for those old sf counter-classics will relish Woolsey's movie-within-a-movie, *Mant.* With cheesy special effects and corny dialogue, it tells the story of a man named Bill who is bitten by an ant while having his dental x-rays taken. The good news is that he has no cavities. The bad news is that he is slowly being transformed into a giant ant. Watch for actors (like William Schallert and Kevin McCarthy) from the original fifties science fiction classics.

Mant certainly qualifies as a parody. But it is really a heartfelt homage to the old movies. Both director and writer clearly identify with Leonard Woolsey, but they also identify with the young people of Key West, who eagerly await the new Saturday matinee, even as they fear being blown to vapor by the Russians before the weekend.

Gene (Simon Fenton), eldest son in a Navy family new to Key West, has nightmares about doomsday, but he fears even more for the safety of his dad on a ship enforcing the Cuban blockade. Stan (Omri Katz — remember him from *Eerie, Indiana!*) doesn't fear for anyone's safety but his own. And forget about the A-bomb. A more immediate threat is the poetry-spouting greaser (James Villemaire) who still thinks he owns Stan's new girlfriend, a cute-as-a-button flirt named Sherry (Kellie Martin). Sandra (Lisa Jakub) is a more serious-minded young woman. So much so that she refuses to submit to the comforting ritual of the school air-raid drill.

The daughter of beatnik parents, Sandra is a second-generation rebel. She'll be ready a few years down the road for the anti-war movement. But as she faces the threat of Armageddon, squarely, without hiding her head from the horrible possibilities, she seems very small and very vulnerable.

The sweetness and naiveté of the *Matinee's* young heroes is jar-

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ring, placed in contrast to their world, where two grown men fight over a box of shredded wheat during a hoarding run on the local market, and troops with rocket launchers take up position on the local beach. And against these two incompatible realities, the cheap theatrics of Woolsey and his screen spectacular, in Atomovision, with Rumble-Rama, seems even more absurd.

And Impresario Woolsey is happy to have it so. With annihilation dangerously close, Leonard cheerfully proclaims it "the perfect time to open a horror movie." Who wouldn't like to trade in real worries for a little cinematic terror? The nuclear threat is a constant, but the horrors *Mant* offers up are over in an hour and a half. And it is the momentary sense of utter relief experienced at movie's end that draws young people to Woolsey's preposterous sf fables. That sigh of relief constitutes a refreshment far greater than a Coke and a box of Jujubes.

Like the director and the screenwriter, I lived through the time period at the age of the film's young heroes. And, to me, Dante and Haas really got it right. I loved the movie they made. How could I help but feel all warm inside about a funny, affectionate nostalgia trip about my very own generation, filled with a genuine passion for our formative pop culture? *Matinee* is my idea of movie enjoyment.

But, hey! Not everyone is my age. (And I wouldn't want them to be.) Specifically, the young people of today — the very folks who make or break the theatrical release of a Hollywood movie — are a generation away from the events of the Fall of 1962. The guilty thrill Gene and Stan experience sneaking a listen to *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce* seems ridiculous to them. (These kids hear worse than that in their classrooms.)

And although most know the names of filmmakers like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas, they haven't the foggiest idea who Jack Arnold might have been. They generally have no interest in black and white films and tend to believe that if the FX aren't from a high-tech firm like ILM, they aren't worth watching.

Who can blame them for considering *Matinee* a poor excuse for a movie? Even Joe Dante, who poured four years of his life into developing this film, ought to be able to understand why his film failed to find a cross-generational audience. After all, *Matinee* contains an engagingly vicious little pastiche of those wholesome Disney films of the fifties and

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sixties called *The Shook-up Shopping Cart.*

Movies are not what they once were. And, you know, they never have been. The changes just in the horror field, in the last thirty years, are blood-curdling to behold. Atomic mutants and films of a dystopian future expressed our fears of a larger world, controlled by politicians. But as the seventies progressed, a more domestic agenda came to horror.

Family relationships and gender politics changed the face (teeth, claws) and attitude of the monster. The male slasher was a guy who substituted orgies of eviscerating violence using power tools for normal sexual responses. (Think of *Home Improvement's* Tim Taylor gone impotent and psychotic.) And the latest popular trend is the woman-from-hell fantasy. (Think of *Home Improvement's* Tim Taylor succumbing to paranoid delusional fantasies about his wife, Jill.)

The conscious and unconscious fears we feel the need to work through during two hours at the Cineplex will unquestionably continue to mutate, like poor old Bill, as time marches on. (I expect a movie about a cellular-phone-from-hell any day now.)

But, as "dated" as it is, I'd like to hope that there will always be room in America's movie houses for a humorous, genial movie like *Matinee.* It may mean more to my generation than to any other, but it should mean something to all of us.

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Ron Goulart's wacky humor pieces have graced the pages of F&SF for years. Ron picks up the motif of being haunted by family that seems to be running through this issue. Only here, the ghost is — perhaps — the most obnoxious of all.

Mom's Cooking

By Ron Goulart

HE ENCOUNTERED THE SANDwich on the afternoon of the day he got fired.

It simply materialized, he was nearly certain, on the empty train seat beside him.

Usually Jeff Varner took the 6:04 from Grand Central. That particular Tuesday, though, having been requested to clear out just as he was planning to go out for a late lunch, he was traveling to Westport on the 3:07.

The train wasn't crowded, which is why there was a place beside him for the sandwich to appear.

Jeff was a thin, middle-sized man of thirty-seven, with far less hair than he would have liked to have.

The sandwich, wrapped in wax paper, was peanut butter and banana on whole wheat. He was sure of that.

He grew all at once chill and his ribs started to tingle as he gazed down at the newly arrived sandwich.

The train was hurrying across the bright late spring afternoon, about a

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half hour out of Manhattan. Jeff had been sitting there with all his office possessions packed into the big cardboard carton resting on his lap. The carton had been provided by his Department Head at the Litwin Corporation. It had, which she'd apologized for, bunny rabbits and baby chicks printed all over it. Nobody could find another box at such short notice.

Jeff had been sitting there on the train, the dumb box on his lap and his attaché case on top of the box, mostly staring, unseeing, out the train window.

He'd worked for Litwin for nearly five years, since before his second marriage, and had thought he was doing fine.

Well, maybe not fine, but okay. Passably.

Jeff had tried to keep from thinking gloomy thoughts by distracting himself with simple mental exercises. He counted the number of bunnies decorating the box, checked to see if they were all identical. He was tallying chicks when the peanut butter sandwich had showed up on the seat.

For a moment or two after he noticed it, he wasn't able to breathe through his nose. He had to open his mouth, suck in air that way.

His fingers and toes felt unusual. His shoulder blades itched.

He hadn't suffered any of these symptoms for nearly four years.

Very slowly, gingerly, he stretched out his right hand. After taking a slow, deep breath, he reached over to poke the sandwich with his forefinger.

It seemed really to be there.

Withdrawing his finger, he folded his hands over his attaché case and concentrated on ignoring the sandwich.

Eventually the train reached Stamford and a few more passengers boarded.

"Is this your sandwich?" inquired a plump black woman who'd halted in the aisle.

"Hum?"

"I don't want to go sitting on your sandwich."

Jeff looked at it, striving to give the impression that he had no connection whatsoever with the damn thing. "No, the guy who just got off must've dropped it."

The woman hesitated, then brushed the sandwich off the seat with the side of her hand. It fell to the floor. "People leave the craziest things behind."

"Um," he agreed.

When he left the train at the Westport station, he risked a quick glance

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down at the floor.

The sandwich was no longer there.

His therapist's office afforded a view of woodlands. It was a gray and overcast Friday morning, three days after he'd been let go by Litwin. The big room was dimly lit, thick with the pungent scent of Eastern incense. Sitar music played quietly on the sound system.

Lamont Crossen was a huge shaggy man of fifty, abundantly bearded and wearing his long gingery hair in a ponytail. He had a tiny gold ring in his left ear and was sipping herb tea from a small, fragile cup. "Rice pudding?" he inquired from his wicker rocker.

Jeff was hunched in the fat armchair he always sat in during his weekly visits. "A bowl of it," he replied. "Still warm, smelling of cinnamon."

"Where'd you see it?"

"The bowl was sitting on the butcher block table in our kitchen."

"What'd it taste like?"

"Jesus, I didn't eat any of it."

"What'd you do with the stuff?"

Jeff glanced out at the oaks and maples. "Well, I flushed it down the toilet actually."

"And the bowl?"

"Tossed that in the garbage. But it didn't stay there."

"Where'd the bowl go?"

"Don't know." He shrugged. "When I looked this morning, it was gone."

Crossen drank more of his peppermint tea. "Did Barb notice the pudding?"

"She wasn't home. Thursday afternoons she tapes her cable exercise show. You know, 'Shape Up or Ship Out!'"

"How do you feel about that?"

"About what? About having a wife who's in better shape than Jane Fonda? It's gratifying, I guess. And now that I'm out of work, the money she makes from a successful show on JokNet is more important than ever to us."

"You don't sound gratified."

"I was feeling down yesterday, lonely. Usually when she's taping, I'm in the city working."

"And that's when you saw the rice pudding?"

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"You're missing the point."

"Which is?"

"My mother." He was having trouble with his breathing again.

"She's dead, as I recall."

"Four and a half years, yeah."

"Wait now." The rocker creaked as the husky therapist leaned forward, gripping the tiny tea cup in both huge hands. "You feel it's your mother who's responsible for these food manifestations?"

"Sure, who else?" Jeff inhaled through his mouth. "Her cure for anything was food. That's why I weighed 200 pounds in high school. Can't get a date for the dance? Have some chocolate cake. Flunking geometry? Have another helping of rice pudding."

"How does she do it?"

"I'm not an occult investigator. She just does it. First the sandwich — to cheer me up after I got canned. Then the pudding to make me feel less lonely about my wife's not being there."

"So you believe that your mother — what was her name again?"

"Bernice McCrea Varner."

"What'd you call her?"

"Mom."

"You believe that wherever your deceased Mom is — they have cooking facilities?"

"She's a very resourceful woman. She'd find a way to do it."

"Has she done it before, Jeff?"

"Tuesday. The peanut butter and banana slices on whole wheat sandwich was one of Mom's favorite weapons."

"I meant before Tuesday."

"No, nope. She's left me alone since she died."

"Why now then?"

"Don't know. Could be it takes a while to establish contact with our plane of existence. Or maybe they don't allow her any kind of contact unless my life reaches a certain level of shittiness."

When Crossen nodded, his ponytail flicked. "You didn't eat the sandwich either?"

"Of course not, no."

"Why?"

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"That might commit me to something."

"But if your mother's taking an interest in you — that should make you happy, shouldn't it?"

"I wasn't all that happy when she was alive. She had a tendency to intrude. I was, as I've admitted to you before, sort of relieved when she died."

"Now you're feeling guilty about those feelings."

He sat up in the fat chair. "Are you suggesting, Lamont, that guilt is making me imagine peanut butter sandwiches and rice pudding?"

The therapist watched him. "What do you think?"

"On the train — that woman saw the damn sandwich, too. She almost sat on it."

"And you're certain *she* was actually there?"

"C'mon." He laughed. "Maybe I could hallucinate a sandwich — but hell, not a two hundred pound woman."

Crossen finished his tea and rested the cup on one large knee. "Okay, let's say the food is real. What next?"

"Well, I'd like her to stop haunting me. I don't need her consolation *or* her help. Not at all."

"You're an only child, right?"

"Yep, just me."

"What would it take to make her go away?"

"I guess I'll have to convince her I'm okay again," he said. "Get a new job, you know, smooth out things with Barb."

Checking his watch, the therapist stood up. "Can you do that, Jeff?"

After a few seconds he answered, "No way of telling."

THE DAY the letter appeared, he'd been out on three more job interviews. Two in Manhattan, one in Greenwich. That made seventeen in the three weeks since he'd been fired. Jeff had started to suspect, from the way a few of the personnel people eyed him, that the Litwin Corporation may have been spreading stories about why he left the company.

Thus far he hadn't inspired a single job offer.

It was a rainy afternoon and nearly five o'clock when he reached home.

"Barb?" he called, coming into the back hallway from the garage.

Her Fiero wasn't in the garage, but calling out her name was something

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he did automatically whenever he got home from work. Make that got home from hunting for work.

The smell of beef stew filled their two-story saltbox. That was odd, because Barb, while dazzingly fit, wasn't much of a cook. And frozen food usually didn't smell this good.

He looked into the kitchen, but there was no sign of food on the table, on any of the burners or in the microwave.

Stuck to the refrigerator door with one of the cute magnets was a scrawled note from his wife — "Unexpected meeting with some people interested in introducing my exercise tapes to their chain of mall shops. Back late. Any luck? Hope so. Love, B."

He read the message twice, nose wrinkling.

The scent of fresh-cooked stew was still thick in the house.

Jeff, sniffing, went into the hall again. The door to his small den was open and, as he got closer, the aroma grew stronger.

There on his desk, next to the bunnies-and-chicks box he still hadn't gotten around to unpacking, was a plate of beef stew. Rich with chunks of beef, carrots and potatoes. It was still steaming.

A fork sat to the left of the plate. Under the fork, instead of a napkin, was an envelope.

He eased around the desk and, careful not to touch either the plate or the fork, he slid the envelope free.

It was addressed to his wife. There was no stamp or postmark, no return address.

He stood there with the envelope resting on his palm, hefting it as though he were trying to guess its weight.

Then, sighing, he opened it and took out the sheet of folded stationery.

It was the letterhead of *Nutsy Ned — The Discount Computer King!* The handwritten message was dated today and said — "Barb-lover, It turns out I *can* see you tonight! Ditch the asshole and meet me the usual place. Eagerly yours (ha ha) Ned!"

"Damn," said Jeff, letting the hand holding the letter fall to his side.

He walked into the living room. The rain was hitting the stretch of lawn outside hard.

"Why'd you have to show me this, Mom?"

He wasn't exactly surprised that his wife was fooling around, but he'd

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just as well not have known about it. Not just now anyway.

"Fooling around with a guy who comes on his television commercials wearing a leopard skin. 'I must be nuts to sell computers this cheap!' Lord."

He sank down on the sofa, shoulders seriously hunched.

When he went back into his den an hour or so later, the plate of stew was gone.

The fork disappeared sometime during the night.

Crossen rocked a few times in his wicker chair. "Is it broken?"

"No, only swollen up." Jeff touched at his bandaged nose.

"Probably not a great idea to get into hand-to-hand combat," suggested the therapist, "with a woman who hosts a fitness show."

"I didn't hit *her*," he explained. "*She* hit *me*."

"Could be you didn't approach the issue in the best poss — "

"She's cheating on me. With a huge bearlike lout who appears on TV commercials dressed up like Tarzan."

"You were upset when you found out she might possibly be unfaithful?"

"Possibly? Louts don't call your wife Barb-lover if they're just chums."

"But maybe, Jeff, your waving that letter in her face and shouting 'Harlot!' wasn't — "

"I shouted 'Tart!'"

"Equally old-fashioned. Don't you think there are better ways to get a meaningful discussion going? You might have begun by telling her that the idea of her seeing someone else hurts you and that — "

"Not the idea of her *seeing* him, that doesn't bother me. It's the idea of her hopping into the god-damn sack with that ape-man. The guy actually wears his hair in a ponytail and ties it with a silly leather thong. He — "

"I have a ponytail. Tied with a thong."

"Well, it looks sort of silly on you, too."

"Good, a lot of interesting stuff is coming out."

"Here's another interesting item. I told Barb that if she didn't quit shacking up with Nutsy Ned, I was going to divorce her."

"Drastic, yet you got some of your true feelings out in the open."

"Then *she* told *me* that there's a big deal in the works for her exercise show to move to a much larger cable network, which will mean a lot more money," continued Jeff. "Any scandal right now, since it's a very conserva-

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tive outfit, will screw up negotiations."

"Sounds like she ought to be in a conciliatory mood then."

Jeff touched at his nose again. "On the contrary," he said. "Barb pointed out to me that it wouldn't be wise for me to leave her just yet. She explained that, for one thing, our house isn't exactly *ours.*"

"Whose then?"

"Her dear old father, the pharmaceuticals tycoon, owns it actually. He sort of loaned it to us as a wedding present. But no papers were signed."

"What about your other assets?"

"Well, all the money from Barb's ventures goes into her business account." He sighed out another breath. "She handles most of the household bookkeeping and I don't pay much attention. There is a joint checking account that I use, but it's only got a balance of about $3,209. Another problem is that I'm beginning to suspect I'm not going to get another job any time soon."

"The economy is still in fairly bad — "

"That, too, but this is mostly because I think the Litwin Corporation put me on some kind of blacklist. Don't hire this guy sort of thing."

"If you can prove that, Jeff, you've got the basis of a terrific lawsuit."

"Eventually maybe. Right now though — shit, if I leave Barb I stand a damn good chance of sleeping on a grating before winter. About the only other source of money I have is Barb's life insurance policy. But I can't get that until she dies."

"You can borrow on it."

"Barb won't allow that."

Crossen reached his cup of cranberry tea off a speaker. "Who put that letter on your desk?"

"Same person who cooked the stew."

"Your mom?"

"Her ghost, or whatever it is that's haunting me."

"It's your theory, is it, that she somehow found out about the meeting between your wife and Nutsy Ned and then she — "

"Jesus, imagine being cuckolded by a man calling himself Nutsy Ned."

"Your mother somehow got hold of that note and was able to place it where you'd see it?"

"Yeah, exactly."

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"How'd she work that trick?"

"Look, Lamont, if she can whip up a helping of beef stew, she can sure as heck purloin letters," he answered. "Mom probably haunts the house at times. She was there when one of the minions of Barb's boyfriend dropped off that invitation for a roll in the hay."

"Did you try the stew?"

"No, but it sure smelled great," he admitted.

The following Wednesday Jeff attended a Career Rethinking Seminar in New Haven. He found most of the panels at the day-long affair disappointing, especially the one devoted to Starting Anew. When he asked the chubby young woman running it how you could start anew after you'd been blacklisted by the Litwin Corporation, she suggested that he step next door to the Delusions of the Chronically Unemployed panel.

He stuck the thing out, though, hoping he might hear something, somewhere, that would help him get himself back into the work force.

It was dusk when he got back to their house.

There were no lights on.

"Barb?" he called as he flipped the light switches.

She didn't answer.

Her car was in the garage, so she wasn't out helping people shape up or rolling around between the sheets with Nutsy Ned.

"Barb?"

He walked along the central hallway and then he saw her.

Jeff made a gasping sound, running over to where Barb lay at the foot of the stairs.

She was dead. He could tell that even before he knelt beside her.

She'd fallen down the long steep staircase obviously and the fall had killed her.

He stood up after a moment and backed away from her body.

Jeff headed for the kitchen to use the phone.

Before he even reached there he became aware of the aroma of fresh-baked pie.

Rhubarb pie. His favorite.

There was a nice thick slice of it sitting on a plate on the kitchen table. Beside it was a fork. Under the fork rested a sheaf of folded papers.

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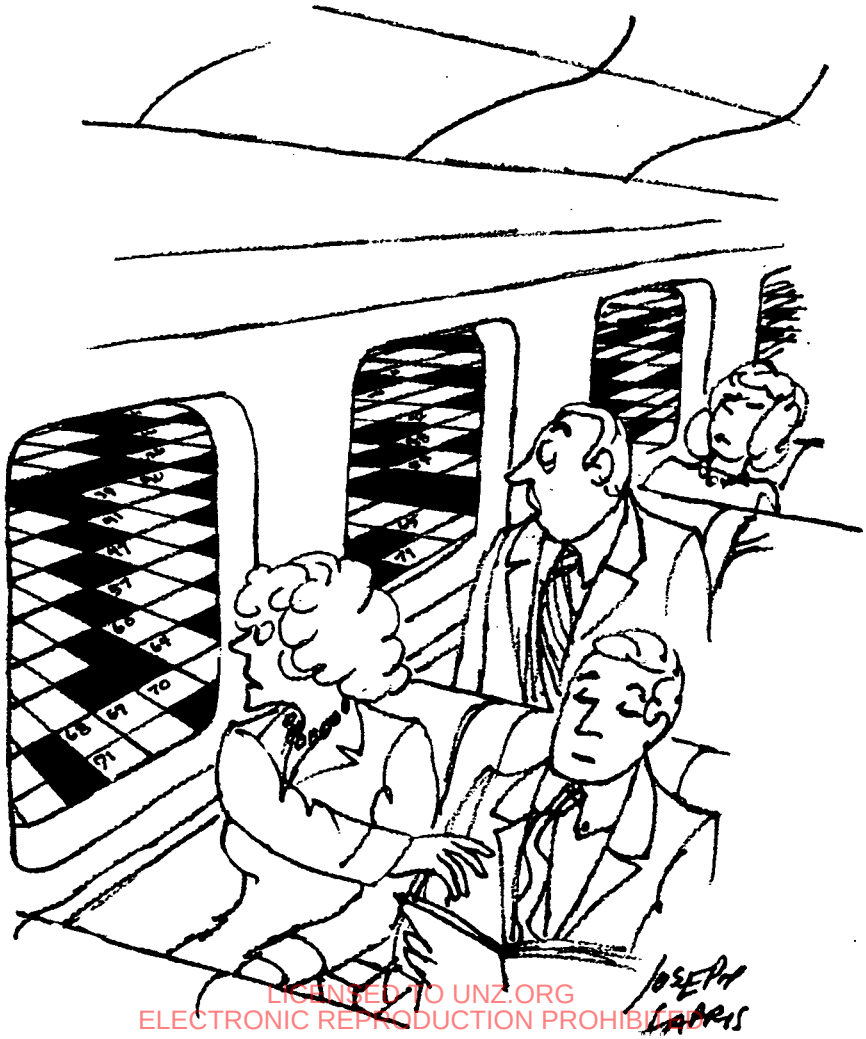
Frowning, Jeff sat down and picked up the papers. It was Barb's insurance policy.

He didn't move for over a minute.

Then he set the policy aside.

Picking up the fork, he cut a bite of pie. He chewed it slowly, savoring it.

After three more bites, he leaned back in his chair. He smiled faintly and said aloud, "Now we're going to have to do something about Litwin."



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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

"CREATION SCIENCE"

IN THE beginning, all geologists and biologists were creationists. This was only natural. In the early days of the Western scientific tradition, the Bible was by far the most impressive and potent source of historical and scientific knowledge.

The very first Book of the Bible, Genesis, directly treated matters of deep geological import. Genesis presented a detailed account of God's creation of the natural world, including the sea, the sky, land, plants, animals and mankind, from utter nothingness. Genesis also supplied a detailed account of a second event of enormous import to geologists: a universal Deluge.

Theology was queen of sciences, and geology was one humble aspect of "natural theology." The investigation of rocks and the structure of the landscape was a pious act, meant to reveal the full glory and intricacy of God's design. Many of the foremost geologists of the 18th and 19th century were theologians: William Buckland, John Pye Smith, John Fleming, Adam Sedgewick. Charles Darwin himself was a one-time divinity student.

Eventually the study of rocks and fossils, meant to complement the Biblical record, began to contradict it. There were published rumblings of discontent with the Genesis account as early as the 1730s, but real trouble began with the formidable and direct challenges of Lyell's uniformitarian theory of geology and his disciple Darwin's evolution theory in biology. The painstaking evidence heaped in Lyell's *Principles of Geology* and Darwin's *Origin of Species* caused enormous controversy, but eventually carried the day in the scientific community.

But convincing the scientific com-

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munity was far from the end of the matter. For "creation science," this was only the beginning.

Most Americans today are "creationists" in the strict sense of that term. Polls indicate that over ninety percent of Americans believe that the universe exists because God created it. A Gallup poll in 1991 established that a full forty-seven percent of the American populace further believes that God directly created humankind, in the present human form, less than ten thousand years ago.

So "creationism" is not the view of an extremist minority in our society — quite the contrary. The real minority are the fewer than ten percent of Americans who are strictly non-creationist. Rejecting divine intervention entirely leaves one with few solid or comforting answers, which perhaps accounts for this view's unpopularity. Science offers no explanation whatever as to why the universe exists. It would appear that something went bang in a major fashion about fifteen billion years ago, but the scientific evidence for that — the three-degree background radiation, the Hubble constant and so forth — does not at all suggest *why* such an event should have happened in the first place.

One doesn't necessarily have to invoke divine will to explain the origin of the universe. One might speculate, for instance, that the reason there is Something instead of Nothing is because "Nothing is inherently unstable" and Nothingness simply exploded. There's little scientific evidence to support such a speculation, however, and few people in our society are that radically anti-theistic. The commonest view of the origin of the cosmos is "theistic creationism," the belief that the Cosmos is the product of a divine supernatural action at the beginning of time.

The creationist debate, therefore, has not generally been between strictly natural processes and strictly supernatural ones, but over *how much* supernaturalism or naturalism one is willing to admit into one's worldview.

How does one deal successfully with the dissonance between the word of God and the evidence in the physical world? Or the struggle, as Stephen Jay Gould puts it, between the Rock of Ages and the age of rocks?

Let us assume, as a given, that the Bible as we know it today is divinely inspired and that there are no mistranslations, errors, ellipses, or deceptions within the text. Let us further assume that the account in Genesis is entirely factual and not metaphorical, poetic or mythical.

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Genesis says that the universe was created in six days. This divine process followed a well-defined schedule.

Day 1. God created a dark, formless void of deep waters, then created light and separated light from darkness.

Day 2. God established the vault of Heaven over the formless watery void.

Day 3. God created dry land amidst the waters and established vegetation on the land.

Day 4. God created the sun, the moon, and the stars, and set them into the vault of heaven.

Day 5. God created the fish of the sea and the fowl of the air.

Day 6. God created the beasts of the Earth and created one male and one female human being.

On Day 7, God rested.

Humanity thus began on the sixth day of creation. Mankind is one day younger than birds, two days younger than plants, and slightly younger than mammals. How are we to reconcile this with scientific evidence suggesting that the Earth is over four billion years old and that life started as a single-celled ooze some three billion years ago?

The first method of reconciliation is known as "gap theory." The very first verse of Genesis declares that God created the heaven and the Earth, but God did not establish "Day" and "Night" until the fifth verse. This suggests that there may have been an immense span of time, perhaps eons, between the creation of matter and life, and the eventual beginning of the modern day-night cycle. Perhaps there were multiple creations and cataclysms during this period, accounting for the presence of oddities such as trilobites and dinosaurs, before a standard six-day Edenic "restoration" around 4,000 BC.

Various flavors of "gap theory" were favored by Biblical scholar Charles Scofield, prominent '30s barnstorming evangelist Harry Rimmer, and well-known modern televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, among others.

The second method of reconciliation is "day-age theory." In this interpretation, the individual "days" of the Bible are considered not modern twenty-four hour days, but enormous spans of time. Day-age theorists point out that the sun was not created until Day Four, more than halfway through the process. It's difficult to understand how or why the Earth would have a contemporary twenty-four-hour "day" without a Sun. The Beginning, therefore, likely took place eons ago, with matter created on the first "day," life

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emerging on the third "day," the fossil record forming during the eons of "days" three, four, five, and six. Humanity, however, was created directly by divine fiat and did not "evolve" from lesser animals.

Perhaps the best-known "day-age" theorist was William Jennings Bryan, three-times US presidential candidate and a prominent figure in the Scopes evolution trial in 1925.

In modern creation-science, however, both gap theory and day-age theory are in eclipse, supplanted and dominated by "flood geology." The most vigorous and influential creation-scientists today are flood geologists, and their views (though not the only views in creationist doctrine) have become synonymous with the terms "creation science" and "scientific creationism."

"Flood geology" suggests that this planet is somewhere between 6,000 and 15,000 years old. The Earth was entirely lifeless until the six literal twenty-four-hour days that created Eden and Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were the direct ancestors of all human beings. All fossils, including so-called pre-human fossils, were created about 3,000 BC during Noah's Flood, which submerged the entire surface of the Earth and destroyed all air-breathing life that was not in the Ark (with the possible exception of air-breathing mammalian sea life). Dinosaurs, which did exist but are probably badly misinterpreted by geologists, are only slightly older than the human race and were co-existent with the patriarchs of the Old Testament. Actually, the Biblical patriarchs were contemporaries with all the creatures in the fossil record, including trilobites, pterosaurs, giant ferns, nine-foot sea scorpions, dragonflies two feet across, tyrannosaurs, and so forth. The world before the Deluge had a very rich ecology.

Modern flood geology creation-science is a stern and radical school. Its advocates have not hesitated to carry the war to their theological rivals. The best known creation-science text (among hundreds) is probably *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications* by John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris (1961). Much of this book's argumentative energy is devoted to demolishing gap theory, and especially, the more popular and therefore more pernicious day-age theory. Both these rival theories are seen as unnecessary compromises with the real enemy, secular uniformitarian geology.

Whitcomb and Morris point out with devastating logic that plants, created on Day Three, could hardly have been expected to survive for

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"eons" without any daylight from the Sun, created on Day Four. Nor could plants pollinate without bees, moths and butterflies—winged creatures that were products of Day Five.

Whitcomb and Morris marshal a great deal of internal Biblical testimony for the everyday, non-metaphorical, entirely real-life existence of Adam, Eve, Eden, and Noah's Flood. Jesus Christ Himself refers to the reality of the Flood in Luke 17, and to the reality of Adam, Eve, and Eden in Matthew 19.

Creationists have pointed out that without Adam, there is no Fall; with no Fall, there is no Atonement for original sin; without Atonement, there can be no Savior. To lack faith in the historical existence and the crucial role of Adam, therefore, is necessarily to lack faith in the historical existence and the crucial role of Jesus. Taken on its own terms, this is a difficult piece of reasoning to refute, and is typical of Creation-Science analysis.

To these creation-scientists, the Bible is very much all of a piece. To begin pridefully picking and choosing within God's Word about what one may or may not choose to believe is to risk an utter collapse of faith that can only result in apostasy — "going to the apes." These scholars are utterly and soberly determined to believe every word of the Bible, and to use their considerable intelligence to prove that it is the literal truth about our world and our history as a species.

Cynics might wonder if this activity were some kind of elaborate joke, or perhaps a wicked attempt by clever men to garner money and fame at the expense of gullible fundamentalist supporters. Any serious study of the lives of prominent Creationists establishes that this is simply not so. Creation scientists are not poseurs or hypocrites. Many have spent many patient decades in quite humble circumstances, often enduring public ridicule, yet still working selflessly and doggedly in the service of their beliefs. When they state, for instance, that evolution is inspired by Satan and leads to pornography, homosexuality, and abortion, they are entirely in earnest. They are describing what they consider to be clear and evident facts of life.

Creation-science is not standard, orthodox, respectable science. There is, and always has been, a lot of debate about what qualities an orthodox and respectable scientific effort should possess. It can be stated though that science should have at least two basic requirements: (A) the scientist should be willing to follow the data where it leads, rather than

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bending the evidence to fit some preconceived rationale, and (B) explanations of phenomena should not depend on unique or nonmaterial factors. It also helps a lot if one's theories are falsifiable, reproducible by other researchers, openly published and openly testable, and free of obvious internal contradictions.

Creation-science does not fit that description at all. Creation-science considers it sheer boneheaded prejudice to eliminate miraculous, unique explanations of world events. After all, God, a living and omnipotent Supreme Being, is perfectly capable of directing mere human affairs into any direction He might please. To simply eliminate divine intervention as an explanation for phenomena, merely in order to suit the intellectual convenience of mortal human beings, is not only arrogant and arbitrary, but absurd.

Science has accomplished great triumphs through the use of purely naturalistic explanations. Over many centuries, hundreds of scientists have realized that some questions can be successfully investigated using naturalistic techniques. Questions that cannot be answered in this way are not science, but instead are philosophy, art, or theology. Scientists assume as a given that we live in a natural universe that obeys natural laws.

It's conceivable that this assumption might not be the case. The entire cognitive structure of science hinges on this assumption of natural law, but it might not actually be true. It's interesting to imagine the consequences for science if there were to be an obvious, public, irrefutable violation of natural law.

Imagine that such a violation took place in the realm of evolutionary biology. Suppose, for instance, that tonight at midnight Eastern Standard Time every human being on this planet suddenly had, not ten fingers, but twelve. Suppose that all our children were henceforth born with twelve fingers also and we now found ourselves a twelve-fingered species. This bizarre advent would violate Neo-Darwinian evolution, many laws of human metabolism, the physical laws of conservation of mass and energy, and quite a few other such. If such a thing were to actually happen, we would simply be wrong about the basic nature of our universe. We thought we were living in a world where evolution occurred through slow natural processes of genetic drift, mutation, and survival of the fittest; but we were mistaken. Where the time had come for our species to evolve to a twelve-fingered status, we simply did it in an instant

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all at once, and that was that.

This would be a shock to the scientific worldview equivalent to the terrible shock that the Christian worldview has sustained through geology and Darwinism. If a shock of this sort were to strike the scientific establishment, it would not be surprising to see scientists clinging, quite irrationally, to their naturalist principles — despite the fact that genuine supernaturalism was literally right at hand. Bizarre rationalizations would surely flourish — queer "explanations" that the sixth fingers had somehow grown there naturally without our noticing, or perhaps that the fingers were mere illusions and we really had only ten after all, or that we had always had twelve fingers and that all former evidence that we had once had ten fingers were evil lies spread by wicked people to confuse us. The only alternative would be to fully face the terrifying fact that a parochial notion of "reality" had been conclusively toppled, thereby robbing all meaning from the lives and careers of scientists.

This metaphor may be helpful in understanding why it is that Whitcomb and Morris's *Genesis Flood* can talk quite soberly about Noah storing dinosaurs in the Ark. They would have had to be *young* dinosaurs, of course.... If we assume that one Biblical cubit equals 17.5 inches, a standard measure, then the Ark had a volume of 1,396,000 cubic feet, a carrying capacity equal to that of 522 standard railroad stock cars. Plenty of room!

Many other possible objections to the Ark story are met head-on, in similar meticulous detail. Noah did not have to search the Earth for wombats, pangolins, polar bears and so on; all animals, including the exotic and distant ones, were brought through divine instinct to the site of the Ark for Noah's convenience. It seems plausible that this divine intervention was, in fact, the beginning of the migratory instinct in the animal kingdom. Similarly, hibernation may have been created by God at this time, to keep the thousands of animals quiet inside the Ark and also reduce the need for gigantic animal larders that would have overtaxed Noah's crew of eight.

Evidence in the Biblical genealogies shows that pre-Deluge patriarchs lived far longer than those after the Deluge, suggesting a radical change in climate, and not for the better. Whitcomb and Morris make the extent of that change clear by establishing that before the Deluge it never rained. There had been no rainbows before the Flood — Genesis states clearly that the rainbow came into

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existence as a sign of God's covenant with Noah. If we assume that normal diffraction of sunlight by water droplets was still working in pre-Deluge time (as seems reasonable), then this can only mean that rainfall did not exist before Noah. Instead, the dry Earth was replenished with a kind of ground-hugging mist (Genesis 2:6).

The waters of the Flood came from two sources: the "Fountains of the great deep" and "the windows of heaven." Flood geologists interpret this to mean that the Flood waters were subterranean and present high in the atmosphere. Before they fell to Earth by divine fiat, the Flood's waters once surrounded the entire planet in a "vapor canopy." When the time came to destroy his Creation, God caused the vapor canopy to fall from outer space until the entire planet was submerged. That water is still here today; the Earth in Noah's time was not nearly so watery as it is today, and Noah's seas were probably much shallower than ours. The vapor canopy may have shielded the Biblical patriarchs from harmful cosmic radiation that has since reduced human lifespan well below Methuselah's 969 years.

The laws of physics were far different in Eden. The Second Law of Thermodynamics likely began with Adam's Fall. The Second Law of Thermodynamics is strong evidence that the entire Universe has been in decline since Adam's sin. The Second Law of Thermodynamics may well end with the return of Jesus Christ.

Noah was a markedly heterozygous individual whose genes had the entire complement of modern racial characteristics. It is a fallacy to say that human embryos recapitulate our evolution as a species. The bumps on human embryos are not actually relic gills, nor is the "tail" on an embryo an actual tail — it only resembles one. Creatures cannot evolve to become more complex because this would violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In our corrupt world, creatures can only degenerate. The sedimentary rock record was deposited by the Flood and it is all essentially the same age. The reason the fossil record appears to show a course of evolution is because the simpler and cruder organisms drowned first, and were the first to sift out in the layers of rubble and mud.

Related so baldly and directly, flood geology may seem laughable, but *The Genesis Flood* is not a silly or comic work. It is five hundred pages long, and is every bit as sober, straightforward and serious as, say, a college text on mechanical engineering.

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The Genesis Flood has sold over 200,000 copies and gone through 29 printings. It is famous all over the world. Today Henry M. Morris, its co-author, is the head of the world's most influential creationist body, the Institute for Creation Research in Santee, California.

It is the business of the I.C.R. to carry out scientific research on the physical evidence for creation. Members of the I.C.R. are accredited scientists, with degrees from reputable mainstream institutions. Dr. Morris himself has a Ph.D. in engineering and has written a mainstream textbook on hydraulics. The I.C.R.'s monthly newsletter, *Acts and Facts*, is distributed to over 100,000 people. The Institute is supported by private donations and by income from its frequent seminars and numerous well-received publications.

In February 1993, I called the Institute by telephone and had an interesting chat with its public relations officer, Mr. Bill Hoesch. Mr. Hoesch told me about two recent I.C.R. efforts in field research. The first involves an attempt to demonstrate that lava flows at the top and the bottom of Arizona's Grand Canyon yield incongruent ages. If this were proved factual, it would strongly imply that the thousands of layers of sedimentary rock in this world-famous mile-deep canyon were in fact all deposited at the same time and that conventional radiometric methods are, to say the least, gravely flawed. A second I.C.R. effort should demonstrate that certain ice-cores from Greenland, which purport to show 160 thousand years of undisturbed annual snow layers, are in fact only two thousand years old and have been misinterpreted by mainstream scientists.

Mr. Hoesch expressed some amazement that his Institute's efforts are poorly and privately funded, while mainstream geologists and biologists often receive comparatively enormous federal funding. In his opinion, if the Institute for Creation Research were to receive equivalent funding with their rivals in uniformitarian and evolutionary so-called science, then creation-scientists would soon be making valuable contributions to the nation's research effort.

Other creation scientists have held that the search for oil, gas, and mineral deposits has been confounded for years by mistaken scientific orthodoxies. They have suggested that successful flood-geology study would revolutionize our search for mineral resources of all kinds.

Orthodox scientists are blinded by their naturalistic prejudices. Carl Sagan, whom Mr. Hoesch described

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as a "great hypocrite," is a case in point. Carl Sagan is helping to carry out a well-funded search for extraterrestrial life in outer space, despite the fact that there is no scientific evidence whatsoever for extraterrestrial intelligence, and there is certainly no mention in the Bible of any rival covenant with another intelligent species. Worse yet, Sagan boasts that he could detect an ordered, intelligent signal from space from the noise and static of mere cosmic debris. But here on Earth we have the massively ordered and intelligently designed "signal" called DNA, and yet Sagan publicly pretends that DNA is the result of random processes! If Sagan used the same criteria to distinguish intelligence from chance in the study of Earth life, as he does in his search for extraterrestrial life, then he would have to become a Creationist!

I asked Mr. Hoesch what he considered the single most important argument that his group had to make about scientific creationism.

"Creation versus evolution is not science versus religion," he told me. "It's the science of one religion versus the science of another religion."

The first religion is Christianity; the second, the so-called religion of Secular Humanism. Creation scientists consider this message the single most important point they can make. Creation scientists consider themselves moral entrepreneurs in a battle of world-views. It is no accident, to their mind, that American schools teach "scientific" doctrines that are inimical to fundamentalist, Bible-centered Christianity. It is not a question of value-neutral facts that all citizens in our society should quietly accept; it is a question of good versus evil, of faith versus nihilism, of decency versus animal self-indulgence, and of discipline versus anarchy. Evolution degrades human beings from immortal souls created in God's image to bipedal mammals of no more moral consequence than other apes. People who do not properly value themselves or others will soon lose their dignity, and then their freedom.

Science education, for its part, degrades the American school system from a localized, community-responsible, democratic institution teaching community values, to an amoral indoctrination-machine run by remote and uncaring elitist mandarins from Big Government and Big Science.

Most people in America today are creationists of a sort. Most people in America today care little if at all about the issue of creation and evolution. Most people don't really care much if the world is six billion years

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old, or six thousand years old, because it doesn't impinge on their daily lives. Even radical creation-scientists have done very little to combat the teaching of evolution in higher education — university level or above. They are willing to let Big Science entertain its own arcane nonsense — as long as they and their children are left in peace.

But when world-views collide directly, there is no peace. The first genuine counter-attack against evolution came in the 1920s, when high-school education suddenly became far more widely spread. Christian parents were shocked to hear their children openly contradicting God's Word and they felt they were losing control of the values taught their youth. Many state legislatures in the USA outlawed the teaching of evolution in the 1920s.

In 1925, a Dayton, Tennessee high school teacher named John Scopes deliberately disobeyed the law and taught evolution to his science class. Scopes was accused of a crime and tried for it, and his case became a national cause célèbre. Many people think the "Scopes Monkey Trial" was a triumph for science education, and it was a moral victory in a sense, for the pro-evolution side successfully made their opponents into objects of national ridicule. Scopes was found guilty, however, and fined. The teaching of evolution was soft-pedalled in high-school biology and geology texts for decades thereafter.

A second resurgence of creationist sentiment took place in the 1960s, when the advent of Sputnik forced a reassessment of American science education. Fearful of falling behind the Soviets in science and technology, the federal National Science Foundation commissioned the production of state-of-the-art biology texts in 1963. These texts were fiercely resisted by local religious groups who considered them tantamount to state-supported promotion of atheism.

The early 1980s saw a change of tactics as fundamentalist activists sought equal time in the classroom for creation-science — in other words, a formal acknowledgement from the government that their world-view was as legitimate as that of "secular humanism." Fierce legal struggles in 1982, 1985, and 1987 saw the defeat of this tactic in state courts and the Supreme Court.

This legal defeat has by no means put an end to creation-science. Creation advocates have merely gone underground, no longer challenging the scientific authorities directly on their own ground, or the legal ground of the courts, but concentrating on

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grass-roots organization. Creation scientists find their messages received with attention and gratitude all over the Christian world.

Creation-science may seem bizarre, but it is no more irrational than many other brands of cult archeology that find ready adherents everywhere. All over the USA, people believe in ancient astronauts, the lost continents of Mu, Lemuria or Atlantis, the shroud of Turin, the curse of King Tut. They believe in pyramid power, Velikovskian catastrophism, psychic archeology, and dowsing for relics. They believe that America was the cradle of the human race, and that PreColumbian America was visited by Celts, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Romans, and various lost tribes of Israel. In the high-tech 1990s, in the midst of headlong scientific advance, people believe in all sorts of odd things. People believe in crystals and telepathy and astrology and reincarnation, in ouija boards and the evil eye and UFOs.

People don't believe these things because they are reasonable. They believe them because these beliefs make them feel better. They believe them because they are sick of believing in conventional modernism with its vast corporate institutions, its secularism, its ruthless consumerism and its unrelenting reliance on the cold intelligence of technical expertise and instrumental rationality. They believe these odd things because they don't trust what they are told by their society's authority figures. They don't believe that what is happening to our society is good for them, or in their interests as human beings.

The clash of world views inherent in creation-science has mostly taken place in the United States. It has been an ugly clash in some ways, but it has rarely been violent. Western society has had a hundred and forty years to get used to Darwin. Many of the sternest opponents of creation-science have in fact been orthodox American Christian theologians and church officials, wary of a breakdown in traditional American relations of church and state.

It may be that the most determined backlash will come not from Christian fundamentalists, but from the legions of other fundamentalist movements now rising like deep-rooted mushrooms around the planet: from Moslem radicals both Sunni and Shi'ite, from Hindu groups like Vedic Truth and Hindu Nation, from militant Sikhs, militant Theravada Buddhists, or from a formerly communist world eager to embrace half-forgotten orthodoxies. What loyalty do these people owe to the methods

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of trained investigation that made the West powerful and rich?

Scientists believe in rationality and objectivity — even though rationality and objectivity are far from common human attributes, and no human being practices these qualities flawlessly. As it happens, the scientific enterprise in Western society currently serves the political and economic interests of scientists as human beings. As a social group in Western society, scientists have successfully identified themselves with the practice of rational and objective inquiry, but this situation need not go on indefinitely. How would scientists themselves react if their admiration for reason came into direct conflict with their human institutions, human community, and human interests?

One wonders how scientists would react if truly rational, truly objective, truly nonhuman Artificial Intelligences were winning all the tenure, all the federal grants, and all the Nobels. Suppose that scientists suddenly found themselves robbed of cultural authority, their halting efforts to understand made the object of public ridicule in comparison to the sublime efforts of a new power group — superbly rational computers. Would the qualities of objectivity and rationality still receive such acclaim from scientists? Perhaps we would suddenly hear a great deal from scientists about the transcendant values of intuition, inspiration, spiritual understanding, and deep human compassion. We might see scientists organizing to assure that the Pursuit of Truth should slow down enough for them to keep up. We might perhaps see scientists struggling with mixed success to keep Artificial Intelligence out of the schoolrooms. We might see scientists stricken with fear that their own children were becoming strangers to them, losing all morality and humanity as they transferred their tender young brains into cool new racks of silicon ultrarationality — all in the name of progress.

But this isn't science. This is only bizarre speculation.

For Further Reading:

The Creationists by Ronald L. Numbers (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). Sympathetic but unsparing history of Creationism as movement and doctrine.

The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications by John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1961). Best-known and most often-cited Creationist text.

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Many Infallible Proofs: Practical and Useful Evidences of Christianity by Henry M. Morris (CLP Publishers, 1974). Dr. Morris goes beyond flood geology to offer evidence for Christ's virgin birth, the physical transmutation of Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, etc.

Catalog of the Institute for Creation Research (P. O. Box 2667, El Cajon, CA 92021). Free catalog listing dozens of Creationist publications.

Cult Archaeology and Creationism: Understanding Pseudoscientific Beliefs about the Past edited by Francis B. Harrold and Raymond A. Eve (University of Iowa Press, 1987). Indignant social scientists tie into highly nonconventional beliefs about the past.

"The Book of Genesis. The big bang. The Book of Genesis. The big bang. The Book of..."

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Stephen Dedman works for the Department of Education in Australia. He has also been an actor, the manager of an sf bookshop, and a dinosaur salesman for the Western Australian Museum.

Stephen has sold short fiction to Pulphouse, Aurealis, The Last Dangerous Visions, Blood and Roses, *and* Down Deep. *He made his first appearance in F&SF in our last issue with a quirky sf piece, "As Wise As Serpents." He follows it up with another quirky sf story, "Vigil."*

Vigil

By Stephen Dedman

THE DRUNK IN THE Stetson thumped his fist on the table, proving that he wasn't dead. I heard him mutter, "... an' nex' thing you know, they'll be wanting the vote, jes' like the goddamn . . ." as I faded out the Muzak and cued "Rawhide" for Melanie. The drunk was trying to simultaneously outstare three deiks (though God knows how many of them he could see), who seemed amused at his outburst, though they couldn't have understood him. Most human voices are just a subsonic rumble to deik hearing: Desmond Morris has been trying to devise a human-deinonychus-saurornithoid interlingua ever since he died, a sort of pidgin from Hell, but it consists mostly of hand signals and very few deiks have shown any interest in learning it.

Joe sidled closer to the cash register, which is also where he keeps his guns, but the drunk didn't seem likely to make any trouble: he just stared

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into his Coors, even when I dimmed the lights and Melanie moseyed out onto the catwalk. Tiff doesn't like me watching the other girls too closely (though God help me if I objected to men watching *her*), so I kept one eye on the drunk and the other on the deiks. They glanced over at Melanie as her frock coat hit the floor, but soon turned back to the drunk. I guess they'd seen enough of mammals back in the Cretaceous, but this might have been their first time inside a bar. With their chrome-yellow heads and scarlet wattles, they looked unpleasantly like condors waiting for something to die.

Joe was watching the deiks as well (hell, he's seen more naked women than I've seen dinosaurs; they're like wallpaper to him), flinching slightly every time a rigid tail swept over a table and through the glasses. Joe gets a grand from the ghost banks every month, which more than compensates him for all the dead who ignore his "Two Drinks Minimum" sign (the dead are free with their money; after all, what can they buy that's any use to them?), but Joe isn't happy: if there was a way to keep them out, he'd do it. *He* should worry: I wouldn't be in this dive at all if the museum could afford to keep me on full-time, but who's going to go to a museum when he can see Alamosaurs in Tranquillity Park, or hear Davy Crockett lie his way into the Guinness Book of Records?

By the time the drunk hit the table, Melanie was down to her gunbelt, boots and hat, and was pointing her tits at the audience as though she were squeezing off shots, and no one noticed him fall but Joe, the deiks, and I. One deik nodded wisely — or so it seemed — and then the three turned tail and trotted out through the wall.

There were sightings before 2008 — well, there have been sightings all through recorded history. Some of them escaped, and some may have been spies, but it wasn't until last Halloween, when Harry Houdini walked into a Detroit newsroom, that anyone thought of them as refugees.

The story came out slowly — the authorized history still isn't finished — and you had to be careful what you believed. Thousands were ready to take the credit, and they did, but most of the dead agree that it was Gorbachev and Yeltsin, working together, who began tearing down the walls of Hell — or Limbo, Gehenna, Niflheim or Bardo, depending on who you're talking to. It's safest just to call it the Afterlife. No one likes to admit they might have been damned.

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* * *

"How many dead were in there tonight?"

I looked away from the newscast — Shakespeare was threatening to rewrite his tragedies, saying that they unfairly portrayed the dead as vicious and vengeful — and into Tiff's beautiful blue eyes. "I don't know. There were three deinonychi and a stenychosaur — I think the stenk was a female —"

"Jerry. . . ."

"I didn't count. O.K.?"

She sank farther under the covers, and I realized that though we'd been in bed for an hour (it was the only spot in the caravan where we could both watch TV), she was still shivering. "Why?" No answer. "Tiffany? Love?"

"What?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why does it matter how many dead were in the club?" The way the lights at the Longhorn are arranged, the girls can't see past the second row of seats.

"They scare me. That's why."

"The dead scare you? Honey, they can't hurt you, they can't even *touch* you, they're not the ones with —"

She reached over and grabbed my hand, and slid it up under her T-shirt and between her breasts. "I can't touch *them*," she replied, simply. "And I can't build a wall that can keep them out. I don't let them in, they're just there. Don't they scare you, too?"

I shrugged. I like most of the dead I've met; they're more interested in ideas and people and things that *matter*, rather than day-to-day stuff like money. I guess my face must have shown this, because Tiff pouted slightly. "O.K., so maybe it's not rational," she said. "Haven't you ever been scared of something that can't hurt you?"

"I don't think so."

"What *does* scare you?"

"Guns, but they're *meant* to hurt people."

"Why guns?"

I stared at the television, saw Ben Franklin speaking at Drexel University. "My father was shot, and killed, back when I was ten. 1991. The woman who did it claimed he stole her purse: she was never charged, even

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though there were no witnesses and the gun she shot him with was *in* her purse."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Playing cowgirls and Indians, I guess — with a real gun, and a real Indian." Dad was a quarter Brulé Sioux and a second-generation hippie, wore his hair in thick black plaits down to his belt. "I don't blame the woman — O.K., I *do* blame her, even though she's dead, but I don't hate her. From what I've heard, she was a pretty good person for most of her life, made some people happy, but the gun . . . the gun was made to be hidden in a purse or a pocket and only taken out to kill a human being. That's the only thing it could do."

She nodded. "Your father died here? In Houston?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you grew up in the village?"

"Yeah, with my mother. Dad was a bum, like me."

"You're not a bum."

"Well, whatever I am, he was, and he picked the wrong time to come here. Some psycho had driven into a restaurant in Killeen and killed twenty-two people and himself, about a week before, and you know how lots of people react after a massacre like that: they buy as many guns as they can, and they start shooting at shadows, and. . . ."

She grabbed my other hand, and squeezed it. "I'm sorry I —"

"Hell, you weren't to know. You were only, what, five or six? And it probably didn't even make the news *here*." All I know about Tiff's family is that she won't talk about them, or even use her family name, and that they probably lived in Maine (she hides her accent well, but it slips out when she talks to cats and babies).

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"Marry me?" I hadn't proposed in over a week, and I needed the practice. "I don't mind if you don't change your name. . . ."

"I was hoping for a *sensible* suggestion," she replied, dryly. I put my arm around her, and held her closer to me, and no ghosts disturbed us at all, that night.

I saw Willy Ley at the museum, that Saturday. I knew he'd died a few weeks before *Apollo 11*, but I'd forgotten that he'd been a zoologist before becoming interested in astronautics. We sat on the roof after closing time, watching a Quetzalcoatlus coasting on the thermals. Occasionally, we'd

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hear some idiot take a shot at it, but it paid them no mind.

No one, dead or alive, seems to know why some species have returned en masse, and others haven't. Quets are all wings and no brain, and I don't know anyone who believes they have souls. The ceratopians aren't much smarter, and they have tempers as foul as the Houston Ship Channel, but there are hundreds of Triceratops prowling around the badlands. Herds of mastodons have been sighted in Alberta, and mammoths in Siberia, and there are photos of plesiosaurs swimming through the Tanami Desert where the Inland Sea used to be, but there haven't been any reports of dire wolves or saber-toothed cats prowling down Wilshire Boulevard. Willy hypothesized that migratory species might be more likely to return, that a sense of direction might be the key, but there isn't enough evidence to be sure. As for why some people have returned, and not others, "Some just don't feel the need; maybe they feel the Earth has changed too much. Others have families, or unfinished work, or just curiosity: I don't think ve're all refugees; many are tourists." He smiled. "Of course, it's hard to be a tourist ven you have to go everyvere by foot. I valked here all the vay from New York."

"At least you don't have to worry about borders and visas."

"No? *We* can't leave Earth: isn't that a border?"

I stared at the quet. "Less than a hundred people a year leave Earth; they never go as far as the Moon, and they all come back. I don't think my chances of being one of them are much better than yours."

He laughed. I don't think I'll ever forget the way he laughed.

IT ISN'T easy recognizing the dead at the Longhorn; Texan male fashion hasn't changed much in the past hundred years, except for soap and after-shave, and the dead don't have any smell at all. The women are a little easier to pick — they're too well dressed, for one thing — but they usually stand near the back wall, in the shadows. Male or female, they rarely stay for more than a few minutes. Apparently, the dead can't even touch each other: watching an advertisement for sex must be bittersweet at best. They rarely intrude into bedrooms, though brothels and bathhouses and even motels are another matter. Tiff was becoming increasingly nervous about working, and Joe let slip that he was auditioning new dancers.

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The local news that night was full of the Barrington trial — a routine manslaughter case in Phoenix, but the first time that dead spoke as witnesses (not the victim, who hadn't returned, but an old family friend). The Singer hoard had been discovered, and donated to the ghost banks. Shooting had begun on Hitchcock's first posthumous movie, *Eclipse*, with Norma Jean Baker starring. And in Europe, hundreds of dead were swarming out of Auschwitz, Dachau, Buchenwald and Belsen, all the old death camps, and disrupting neo-Nazi marches: next time, they warned, it would be thousands. Maybe millions.

Melanie told me that Tiff had been calling her agent, arranging to go back on tour, pose for some magazines, maybe even make another movie. I asked her about it when we were in bed, and she confessed. "I was hoping you'd come with me. . . ."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know. San Francisco, New Orleans, Boston, back to Toronto, maybe overseas. . . ."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Tiffany. . . ."

"This is the first time I've ever known you to want to stay *anywhere:* normally, you can't wait to drop everything you don't need and split. Why here? It can't be the job."

"No."

"One of the other girls?".

"Hell no, and you know it."

"Waiting for your father to come back?"

". . . I don't know."

She shook her head. "I've done some pretty weird things in my time, Geronimo, but at least *I've* never been a necrophile —"

"Tiff, listen —"

"No, *you* listen! You want your father back? He's dead. You want the sixties back? *They're* dead. *We're* alive." And she grabbed me, pressing my face into her breasts. "I'm twenty-two: how long a career d'you think I can expect? And how long d'you think it'll be before there are dead girls in the clubs, girls who don't get old, don't sag and stretch and wrinkle? What'm I supposed to do then? Suicide? *Fuck* that! I'm *alive*, you asshole, and don't

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you fuckin' well forget it!"

She pushed me away, and turned around so I couldn't see her cry. I wanted to touch her, comfort her, but she would probably have thrown me clear across the room. "I'm alive, and I can travel," she sniffed, "and I'm getting the fuck out of here, whether you come with me or not. Dig?"

Halloween passed without incident, at least in Houston. Aleister Crowley convened a meeting of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in Whitechapel, and there was a reported sighting of Vlad Dracula in Romania, but nothing worse. A census revealed that nearly 2 billion human dead had returned, but no Hitler, Attila, Stalin, Idi Amin, Jim Jones, Elisabeth Bathory, John Murrell, Cotton Mather, Charles Manson, Charles Whitman, Patrick Purdy, Ted Bundy or George Hennard. Maybe they don't think they'd like the new world, or maybe there's another wall inside the Afterlife that hasn't been torn down: none of the dead would say.

Business at the Longhorn had fallen off slightly since Tiff left: the new girl was even bustier, but not as pretty, and when you've seen two saline implants, you've seen them all. Most of the clientele was dead, and Joe and I were wondering why they kept coming back, because they didn't seem to be watching the girls. But they seemed comfortable in the place, now that it wasn't crowded, sometimes even coming up to the bar to talk to me. Most of them were interested in the places I'd been, especially places they couldn't visit now that they were dead. They even invited me to a Halloween party in Tranquillity Park, as the only living guest, and what the hell, I didn't have anything better to do.

One man reminisced about his days as a RETRO at the Manned Spacecraft Center, especially being on the Black Team for *Apollo 13*. A beautiful dead blonde told me about seeing Kennedy shot, and said she'd come back hoping to vote for him again. I saw a teenager, murdered in 1972, reunited with his dead parents: the cops had told them he'd probably "joined those hippies in California." I told them all about working as a DJ in a Patpong strip joint, castrating maize in Auvergne, and keeping bar at the Army base outside Munich and quitting when they tried to teach me to shoot. That led to me telling them about my father; the crowd around me fell silent, and the silence spread across the park in concentric rings.

"What was his name?" asked the blonde.

I told them: none of them knew him, but there are a hundred billion

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human dead, after all, and I guess having been shot isn't much of a distinction.

Joe closed the Longhorn just after New Year, having become his own best customer, and the museum "let me go" a few weeks later. Locked doors don't worry the dead, so the reduced hours probably didn't have any effect on business. I'm surviving by working as a scribe for the dead (I used to do the same for Tiff, who was badly dyslexic), and a few have offered to pay me to do their traveling for them — see places they can't go, take photos, visit relatives, that sort of crap. I may take them up on it, when it stops snowing. They don't seem to notice the weather anymore: they'd probably be happy at the South Pole, if they could get there. Tiff's working as a cocktail waitress at the Antarctica Hilton in Komsomolskaya; she says it's booked solid for another year, and not just because of the arcology project. Some people are going that far just to be away from the dead.

The day before I left Houston, the sky was black with passenger pigeons, and a family of five was killed by a stranger with an M-18: the cops think he went to the wrong address. The public reaction was predictable: they bought M-18s by the truckload. The manufacturers must have been creaming their Calvin Kleins.

I was in Chicago when the Kent State Four came back, and I just *had* to see them. Alison Krause and Jeff Miller talk just like my dad used to, and Bill Schroder said that while he'd been prepared to die for his country, he hadn't expected it to happen while he was walking between classes. Sandy Scheuer just wanted to get back to her studies. You can't go into a lecture theater now without seeing the dead, but they're not letting them take exams. I suggested she organize a sit-in: after all, you can only die once. She laughed politely, and the others didn't laugh at all.

The youth hostel was full of dead, most of them young (or apparently young) and all vicariously traveling. I told them my story, but they wouldn't tell me about the Afterlife. Fortunately, with nearly 5 billion come back, some demographic studies have been done. The vast majority of returnees died violently or suddenly, but almost none were suicides. All have been dead at least four years, and most for seven or more (apparently it takes them some time to recover from the shock). None of the dead are younger than ten: maybe small children don't have souls, or maybe coming back, building a new body, is too difficult, too abstract. I'm

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never going to forget seeing Alison and Jeff reenacting their deaths, right up to the stigmata where the bullets hit, and then regenerating before the audience had finished gagging.

The Bob Fosse/Oscar Wilde *Contragate*, with Bogart as Ronald Reagan, is almost worth dying for, but the new *Hamlet* closed in Stratford after a month. Apparently the ghost was removed; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern pushed Hamlet into avenging his father, thinking he'd be a better (*i.e.*, more easily controlled) king than Claudius. At least the sound track sold well — nearly as well as Beethoven's Tenth, Dvořák's Tenth, Mahler's Tenth, and the new Lennon-McCartney. I met a lot of young musicians who complained that no one's interested in live music anymore, but that's show biz for you.

The new mayors of Newark, Philadelphia and Detroit are dead, and there are dead running for Congress and the Senate. Living politicians are being followed everywhere by the dead, and many have decided not to run for reelection. Factories in Korea and Taiwan are churning out thousands of cheap electronic eyes that'll enable the dead to vote in Japan next month. There are Yahi and Gabrielino in California again, Yahgan and Haush in Tierra del Fuego, and aborigines in Tasmania. Tourists are scared to visit the Little Big Horn anymore, and Belsen has been abandoned, left to the dead: some say it'll be the first of many. Alan Turing is doing ads for IBM; Leonardo da Vinci and Lewis Carroll for Polaroid; Abe Lincoln and Bobby Kennedy for tougher gun laws; Einstein, von Braun, Sergei Korolev, Gus Grissom and dozens of others for a better-funded space program. After all, they say, we can't just stay on the Earth forever.

IT WAS still snowing like hell when I reached Montreal; it didn't bother the dead or the dinosaurs, but everyone else stayed underground. I called my mother for the first time since I dropped out of prelaw and she changed the locks on the apartment door, but I didn't visit — men aren't allowed into the commune — and then I headed back to Houston.

Dad wasn't there, but he should have been: he would have loved it. There was a dead in every gun shop and pawnshop, all of them showing their bullet holes like stigmata. The proprietors couldn't move them, couldn't arrest them, couldn't *touch* them. By the end of the week, there were dead in every gun shop in the country, and in every gun factory, and

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outside every shooting range, just standing there like so many Banquo's ghosts. I would have hugged them all, if I could; I would have *tried*, if there hadn't been so many of them, so many. . . .

Selling my camera hurt, but hell, I needed the money, and *everyone's* taking photographs of dinosaurs and no one's buying them. Why should they? They'll still be here tomorrow. So will the Toltecs and the Trojans. So, it seems, will cuirasses and corsets, stiletto heels and designer jeans, Iron Cross Medals and love beads, the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, the nineties, the Pleistocene, the Tertiary, the Cretaceous . . . so much past, that I began wondering where we were going to find room to put the future. . . .

And when I realized — as Tiffany had done months before — I sold everything I owned and borrowed what I could, updated my passport, and bought myself an airline ticket.

It's cold outside — it will be until morning, which is still two months away — the walls are well insulated, and Tiffany keeps me warm enough. If she weren't so much smarter than me, she'd be perfect.

Lying here, I could almost forget the rest of the world existed: it's easier than trying to keep up with the changes. Kennedy is president again, with Martin Luther King as VP, guns are nearly as hard to buy as porn or cigarettes, and the dead — nearly 9 billion of them — are campaigning for land rights. Everyone says it's a safer world than the one I was born into, cleaner, less materialistic. Oh, I applaud what the dead have done, but I didn't realize *why* they were doing it. Maybe I'd left home too long ago to recognize the tone. Didn't *your* parents ever tell you to put away your toys or clean up your room, and wasn't it *always* for your own good, and didn't they *always* know best?

I guess the old Shakespeare was right, after all: when the dead come back, they come back with a vengeance. It isn't our Earth anymore, but what the hell: it's a big universe, and the *Tsiolkovski* will be launched in a few months. Tiff and I and a few hundred other living are going to drop everything we don't need, and run away from home, like kids have always done, like they're *meant* to do. We won't be taking any guns, but hell, we're not taking any ghosts, either.

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Nina Kiriki Hoffman has a cult following in the sf field. Critics have called her "a genius," "a magician," and "one of the Northwest's greatest secrets." She has published two collections of short stories, and has had an issue of Weird Tales *devoted to her work. Last summer, her collaboration with Tad Williams,* Child of an Ancient City, *appeared. This year, Avon has published her first solo novel,* The Thread that Binds the Bones.

"The Skeleton Key" is a quintessential Hoffman story. It deals with a horrific event in a non-gruesome manner. Its fantastic elements belong to the Greek rather than the European tradition. Despite the mixing of Devil worship, death, and the Greek God Hermes, the story's warmth is reminiscent of the best in young adult fiction. Unclassifiable and touching, "The Skeleton Key" is Nina Kiriki Hoffman at her best.

The Skeleton Key

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

BLOOD IS THE INK IN WHICH we write the meaning of our lives. I didn't discover this until after I died. That was when the scribbles I had made with my blood while living became legible, and I learned that I had written well.

By the time I was thirteen I knew Hermes was my favorite god. My mom had read me the D'Aulaires' book of Greek myths when I was eight, and I had memorized all the pictures and most of the myths pretty soon after that. At ten I got my best friend, Sasha, to read the book, and though we were attracted to Artemis and Athena, we loved Hermes best. We were obsessed with things Greek after that. Our thirteenth Halloween, instead of trick-or-treating, Sasha and I snuck off to the hill back of Lindley Farm, carrying what we thought were Greek things.

The air was full of frost and woodsmoke and mischief. We wore our winter coats, hats, gloves, and scarves. Sasha carried a canteen she had half-

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filled with red wine from her parents' liquor cabinet. I had charcoal briquets and a piece of raw flank steak. We had prayers in our pockets. We had thought about using candles to light our way, but it was too windy, so we each had a flashlight.

Near the top of the hill not far from the trail lurked a clearing. We pushed our way through bushes to get there. In a circle of bare-branched sentinel trees, we scuffed new-fallen leaves aside with our boots to bare the earth to the constellations, and sat on the damp ground. I set the charcoal on a flat rock and managed to light it without extra lighter fluid (I'd doused it before I left the house).

Sasha and I did our Greek things: she poured a libation of wine on the earth, dedicating it to all the Olympians, after which we took a comradely sip and winced at the tongue-drying alcoholic taste. I scorched the steak over the coals, saying I hoped the fragrance of the smoke would nourish the gods. We chanted a chant we had devised with many erasings and lots of note passing in history class, which was the most boring class we had, with the least attentive teacher. Our chant was full of careful phrases about how all the gods were great and yet we wanted one of them in particular to watch over us, if that wouldn't offend the rest of them too much (in Greek myths many people appeared to have patron gods, so it didn't seem out of line to ask for it).

We slashed our thumbs with a razor blade I had taken from my dad's medicine cabinet, squeezed out a drop of blood each on the ground (thanking Gaea), pressed our wounds together, and declared that we belonged to the Sisterhood of Hermes.

Sasha's blood was cold and so was mine, but with our fingers pressed together I felt warmth, even though the rest of my hand was freezing. I saw a falling star above me and suddenly my arms and the back of my neck prickled with hair standing on end. I glanced at Sasha. It was too dark for me to see what she was thinking behind her face. Neither of us breathed for a moment. A flower of warmth blossomed in my chest.

"Tess?" Sasha murmured.

"Yes," I whispered, but that was all we said.

At last we separated our hands. I started breathing again, and my sense of mystery in everything went away, but I remembered how it had felt.

Coming down off the hill, Sasha and I were silent. We never talked about what we had felt, but we continued to act as if the Sisterhood were real.

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We taught ourselves the Greek alphabet to the extent of using it as a replacement code for regular letters, and we wrote notes to each other we had trouble decoding. We met once a month and snuck off to our hill, no matter what the weather, and performed rituals we made up, sometimes stealing bits from things we found in the encyclopedia or myth books. It was the best secret we had ever had. Often I felt the silence come over me, the sense that something was listening to us and responding. Sometimes we received signs that our prayers were answered: Sasha got an A on a test she barely studied for; I got the bike I wanted for my fourteenth birthday; we both got dates for school dances; and Sasha found a five-dollar bill on the sidewalk.

It was as close as I got to religion.

By the time I was sixteen, the words "Hermes help me" came out of my mouth instead of cuss words whenever the situation warranted an exclamation, and I didn't even notice. Mom stopped commenting on it after the novelty wore off; Dad had never even remarked on it.

When we were seventeen, Sasha, who had skipped a grade in junior high, left for college. In our letters we never talked about the Sisterhood; she was never home at the right time of month for ritual, and I didn't know if she did something about it where she was. I continued to go to the hilltop to offer fire, wine, words, blood, and the incense of burning meat to the open sky, but I felt lonely without Sasha. The mystery seemed more distant.

Sasha had gone on to the University, but my grade-point average and my ambitions weren't as high as hers. She planned to be a psychologist. I didn't know what I wanted, so when I got out of high school, I decided to settle for General Studies at State, and see if anything excited me. Sasha's letters got shorter and shorter and mostly talked about the fact that she had to study a lot now so she didn't have time to write. I talked about my excitement when I moved into my own studio apartment and how weird it was with Mom and Dad right across town.

Then I met Steve.

If I had seen highlights of my first college semester in a horror movie, I would have been yelling at the girl on screen not to be such an idiot. I mean, it's like when people split up to search the scary house with all the lights off — you know: stupid.

But I was just me, and Steve was just a great-looking curly-haired guy from the coffee shop who invited me to his apartment a couple of times. We

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had a great time at his place. We rented horror movies and ordered out for pizza and played Monster in the Closet after we turned off the TV.

So when he invited me to a Halloween party where there would be a lot of other people like him, I thought it was a terrific idea. Of the four guys I had dated so far in college, Steve was the most fun. If there were more people like him, I was ready to meet them, as long as I got home before midnight, so I could celebrate my fifth anniversary of the Sisterhood up on Lindley Hill. I put a twenty in my pocket for cab fare in case Steve didn't want to leave when I did.

Only he didn't take me to somebody's house; he took me to an abandoned church.

"It's awfully dark," I said when we drove up to the building, which was on the outskirts of town without even a streetlight near it. The only light came from the building itself, a flickering behind broken stained glass windows.

"It's that kind of party, Tess," Steve said, ushering me in through big wooden double doors and barring them behind us.

I began to feel suspicious and a little sick around then, because beyond the entry hall, in the church's chapel, stood a circle of fat black candles on the flagstone floor, and around the circle of light stood a circle of people in dark hooded robes, and on the far wall hung a big black cross, upside down.

The air smelled of patchouli and singed hair.

In the center of the circles of light and people, there was a black slab about six feet long and three feet wide, with shackles attached. It was crusted with something dark and flaky.

I glanced up at the windows. The faces had been broken out of all the saints.

"Hermes help me," I muttered.

They dressed me in a white gown. A young woman with green eyes combed out my hair before they shackled me to the stained stone.

They told me no one would hear me scream, and I tested it and discovered they were right.

They told me Satan would be pleased with me, that each act of humiliation, degradation, and cruelty they practiced on me would bring them power; and that my ultimate sacrifice of blood and life would bring them extreme power. And in the end, they were wrong.

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When at last I wept, voiceless, aching in some parts of me, sharp shocks in others, burning and throbbing elsewhere, when at last Steve drew a knife and spilled my heart's blood, the god came to us in the guise of a dark-haired boy, his chlamys draped carelessly over one shoulder and fastened at the other. In his hand he held the caduceus, his wand of sleep and balm of healing, with serpents twined about it.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said.

Steve had given me a slow but fatal wound. It was a relief, actually, because they stopped torturing me and just waited for me to die. I was still aware enough to see that all the black-robed people fell to the ground. One started a chant, "Bless us, Lord Satan," and all the others joined in.

He glanced at them, but walked through their circle and came to kneel on the slab beside me. "I'm sorry," he said again. Pearly light haloed him. I couldn't figure out if it was my sight going or something that was actually happening. "I'm sorry," he said, touching the smaller wounds. As he touched them the pain faded. "There was so little energy for me in this era that it took your great sacrifice for me to manifest. I would not have had you die for me."

My eyelids were getting heavier, and pain no longer pinned me in place.

"Not against your will," he murmured, putting his hands in the blood on my chest.

I shaped my mouth around the breath coming out of me. "Much rather you than any other," I whispered. Wonder battled the lassitude seeping into me.

"Bless us, Lord Satan. Bless us, Lord Satan," they cried all around us.

He leaned over and pressed his lips to mine, and in that moment, all pain faded and I came free of my body, which stopped breathing. He rose and held out his hand, which glowed with my blood as if it were rosy liquid light. Confused, I reached toward him—how could I do that without a body?—and saw my own arm, a phantom but there, as I held it out.

"Come," he said, taking my hand. I felt a tingling warmth in my palm and fingers where his hand touched mine. The pearly haze wrapped around him was very strong now. We walked out past all the kneeling dark figures. I glanced back once. My body, violated, burned, stabbed, its face twisted with pain, lay in its own blood and fluids. I shuddered and walked through the wall hand in hand with my god.

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We traveled to a place removed from the Earth I had spent my life on, yet just around the corner. We sat in a midnight meadow where all the grasses glowed with green pinpoints of light, and night-blooming flowers offered cores of yellow radiance and golden scent to the stars. From somewhere not too far away a stream whispered and murmured.

"I am the god of travelers," he said, "I am the conductor of souls. I can take you to the next world."

"But I — " I began, then stopped, my fingers touching my throat, surprised at having a voice again. They had gripped my tongue in red-hot pincers, and my screams had left my throat torn and raw; but that pain was gone now.

He waited, smiling at me, so beautiful I wanted to hug him, the image of my dreams and wishes.

"I don't feel ready," I said. Though I didn't know what I meant.

"You can stay for a while," he murmured. "It won't be the same."

After a silence, I touched his knee.

He put his hand on mine, closed his reddened fingers around my hand. "Do you wish to go back into your earth? I have done such a thing before. It would exhaust me, but if it is your desire..."

"My body, you mean?" I asked. I thought of my last sight of my body, hurt, mangled, wretched. "No!" Heat flowed through me as I remembered candlelit faces framed in black hoods. A smile from a brown-eyed woman as she leaned down to flay some skin off my arm. The frowning concentration of a man with deep crow's-feet at the outer edges of his eyes as he sketched a design on my stomach with many prickings of a hot needle. "No," I said, "but I don't want to leave Earth. And I — Lord, those people tortured me...." I stared at my free hand. Each bone in each finger had been broken, yet now my hand looked whole.

"Yes," he said.

"And, Lord, I want to hurt them."

"It will pass," he said after a little while, gripping my hand gently.

"Is it wrong for me to want that?"

"You must want what you want," he said. "I can help you with some things. Vengeance is not one of my attributes. If it is in your heart to search out and punish all who have harmed you..." He looked away. "I can grant you certain limited powers. You will have to use them as you deem best."

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We stood in front of my parents' house. Something in me had called me Home, here, not to my apartment, where I had only lived six months and no one waited. He stood behind me, his hands on my shoulders, warm, comforting as his presence. I could feel strength flowing from him. "Tess," he murmured. "When you are ready to travel on, call me and I'll come for you."

"What if I'm not ready but I just...need you?"

"Call." He turned me so we faced each other, and I stared up into his beautiful face. "Your belief and your blood sacrifice have given me strength. I will come to you if I can. But Tess..." He put his hand against my cheek. "You have passed out of the realm of existence and entered the realm of belief. If you can't find someone to believe in you, you will have to travel on. My advice is: find believers before you do anything else." He embraced me. He faded away.

I clutched the key he had given me. It was silver, and as long as my forearm. I wanted to be three places at once:

I wanted to be alive and walking up the path to my parents' house, so I could knock on the door and Mom would answer and I would fall into her arms.

I wanted to be with Sasha, telling her that we had been right all along, that there really was a force, that it heard us when we spoke to it.

I wanted to be in the abandoned church.

I wanted to be alive and terrible in the church, slicing all those people open, shedding their blood in the name of my Lord, making him stronger at their expense.

Though when I really thought about it, I knew that wouldn't work, any more than their sacrifice of me had worked; I was already promised to Another. They, too, had made their choice.

The wind rose, carrying papers down the street. I felt it against my face, the faintest tickle of breath.

I walked up the path to my parents' sleeping house.

The curtains to most of the rooms were closed, but through a gap in the living room curtains I saw Dad's recliner with sections of newspaper scattered near it, left the way he had dropped them earlier as he searched out Mom's byline, and Mom's recliner with a stack of blue books on the table next

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to it, one opened: she had been reading the work of Dad's high school students. They spent their evenings talking about work. I had heard it all my life, the excitement Dad felt finding a story in the paper Mom hadn't told him she was working on, his patient suspense as she searched through a stack of exercise papers for the one he thought was a gem. Often she saw things in his students' work that didn't impress him until she pointed them out to him. Sometimes he mentioned an angle she hadn't thought of in her search for a story, and she would address it in the follow-up story. They valued each other's fresh vision.

I wondered how they would see me.

I stood on the porch, thinking about walking through walls the way I had seen ghosts in movies do, wondering. I put my hand on the door and pushed. There was initial resistance. I pushed harder, felt the door against my palm: not solid, really; like water on the verge of freezing, without the cold. I leaned against the door and gradually it parted somehow, its matter moved to either side, and I was in the front hall.

"That takes too long," I muttered. I turned back and jumped at the door. I bumped my chin and scuffed my palms and bounced back into the front hall. "Ouch! Hermes help me!"

"What is it?" he asked, standing beside me.

"Oh. Excuse me. Why is it so hard to walk through things?"

"Did you ask first?"

"What?"

"Everything has its own spirit, Tess. Homes especially, where people sleep; their dreams soak into the walls, investing the dwellings with living energy, for good or ill. Have you asked this dwelling if you could enter?"

"No."

"It admitted you anyway. It knows you."

"It won't let me leave."

"Have you completed your business here, and asked to exit?"

"No."

He stroked my hair. "If you are determined to leave and a dwelling tries to trap you, you can step sideways into the meadow and then emerge where you choose. But a gentle aspect will take you far. Treat everything with respect."

"Step sideways?"

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"Close your eyes and see the meadow where we were."

I did it.

"Take a step."

I stepped.

"Open your eyes."

We were back in the night-dark meadow where the grass glowed.

He smiled at me. "Now. Find your way back."

I closed my eyes and thought about my parents' front hall. I took a step. I opened my eyes and stared at the coat-rack where Dad's fedora hung (he never wore it), Mom's backpack drooped in its straps, and my rain slicker dangled — I had forgotten to take it when I moved out. I turned to thank Hermes, but he was no longer with me.

"Thanks for letting me in," I said to the door. I patted the wood. It felt warmer than it had before. Feeling a little stupid, I went upstairs.

The digital clock on my mom's bedside table said 4:32. Dad's snores were gentle, rhythmic as waves slapping against a dock. Moonlight washed in between the open curtains, touching my parents, who lay comfortable in sleep. I went over to Mom's vanity and sat on the stool. The urge to weep washed over me. They might never know where I had gone. If they ever found out —

— an image of my dead self, twisted and horrible —

— it would hurt them even worse than never knowing. My torture had been finite; theirs might go on for years.

"Mom," I whispered.

My mother's breathing shortened.

"Mom?"

She turned over. "Wha?"

"Mom? Can you hear me?"

She sighed. She rubbed her eyes. She sat up, blew out a breath.

"Mom?"

She took a sip of water from the glass on her bedside table, then lay down, her back to me, and her breathing lengthened again.

"Mom," I said, out loud, but there was no response.

I looked at the key I held, my gift from Hermes. Three times it would work solely at my desire, on locks unwilling or unknowing; otherwise it would be able to unlock only those locks waiting for it, welcoming it. I sat

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a little longer, wondering if this was the right time for its first use.

I didn't know what Steve and his friends did with their corpses. Maybe they ate them or burned them or buried them. Maybe Mom would never know what had happened to me. If she had any idea, would she be able to sleep comfortably again? Maybe I should wait until she woke up naturally. But what if the police found my body and called? Better if she was prepared for it.

I thought of a TV show I once saw about missing children, a segment of "Sixty Minutes," I think, where someone whose child had disappeared said, "You wait. You hope. You cry...a river of tears."

I went to my mother and plunged the key into her chest. It slid in easily, thrumming in my hand. I gave it a half-turn, and her spirit sat up, loosed from her body, blinking and looking around. She wore the same nightgown as her sleeping body, but she looked younger and thinner, and instead of the short crisp curls she had worn since I was twelve, she had long dark waves of hair tumbling down her back. "What?" she said.

"Mom, are you awake?"

"Of course I'm awake, Tessa! What do you think?" She glared at me.

"How do you feel?"

"Startled, I guess. What are you doing home? What time is it?" She glanced over at the bedside table, reached out to switch on the lamp. Her hand went through it. She screamed.

"Mom," I said. I took her spirit hands. They felt more solid than the door had, warm and dry. "Mom. Take it easy."

"Is this a dream?" She looked down, saw her own sleeping form. "Yah!" She was still half inside it, up to the waist. "This had better be a dream!"

I started to cry.

"What is it, baby?" she asked. She rose from her body and hugged me. It felt just like a real hug, a hard one, flesh and bones, breath and beating heart to beating heart. I leaned into her embrace, despair and crushed hope and love lodged in my chest like an arrowhead, burning yet pleasant. I felt like I had when I was ten and really totalled my bike, skinned and scraped myself, bit my lip. I had thought maybe if we hugged hard enough the pain would go away.

"Oh, Mom," I said. I sniffled. Her warmth wrapped me like a cocoon. She stroked my back the way she had when I was little and hurt. "What

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is it?"

"Mom...I'm dead."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said in a soothing voice.

"I'm dead, and it doesn't hurt anymore. I want you to know that."

"This is a strange dream," she said.

"Please remember it. Write it down when you wake up. Promise?"

"How binding is a promise made in a dream?" she mused.

"Promise?"

"All right," she said.

"This is what you have to write: Tess is dead, but she feels good. She's happy. It doesn't hurt."

"That's so sappy, Tess, and on a symbolic level it's quite disturbing. Why should I dream that you're dead?"

"Because it's not a dream. Mom, I love you."

"Well, of course. I love you too, extravagantly. How can this *not* be a dream? I'm separated from myself. That never happens when I'm awake."

"Look." I touched the key's handle, which stuck out of her body's chest. It gleamed silver in the moonlight. The handle was tipped with a hollow heart.

Mom joined me and reached out, touched the key, traced its path down into her body. She stared at me, eyes wide. "Meaning?" she said. "Am I dead too? Is this the shaft of an arrow? If this is a metaphor, I must be quite disturbed about something."

"This is the key I used to unlock your spirit from your body so I could talk to you. I tried talking to you without it, but you didn't hear me too well. Mom, I don't know how to convince you this is real."

"Tessa, if I thought this was real, I'd be going crazy right now."

"But I need you to believe. If you don't believe in me, I won't be able to stay. Mom..."

Her body's breathing was getting fainter. Its head turned; its face frowned. It started panting, short shallow breaths.

Alarmed, I said, "I better put you back." I reached for the key.

Mom laid her hand on mine over the key's handle. "Tess." She hugged me. "Tell me one more time what I'm supposed to believe."

"I'm dead, but I'm okay. And I'm really here, Mom. If you want me to unlock you again so we can talk like this, just say so aloud and I'll do it. I want

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you to know...dying hurt, but I feel good now." I turned the key and pulled it out, and she faded from around me, her warmth seeping away.

Tears ran from her eyes. Sobbing deep breaths replaced her shallow panting. She sat up inside her body, looking wildly around the room, not seeing me. She reached for the light switch, shivering when she touched it. The light turned on and she grabbed the reporter's notebook she always kept beside the bed for noting down night thoughts or the odd urgent phone call. Her pen moved fast across the paper; tears fell and blistered her notes as she wrote.

I watched her blink, tears catching in her eyelashes. She gulped for breaths. When at last her pen slowed she had filled four pages. She touched my father's shoulder; he had been blinking sleepily at the unexpected light for a minute already, and he turned to look up into her face. "Katie? What's wrong?" he murmured.

"I think Tess is dead."

Galvanized, he sat up. His face went pale and his eyes darkened as the pupils flashed wide. "What? How?"

Mom stared at her notes. "She didn't say, exactly."

Dad sucked in breath between his teeth. "Didn't say? Didn't say? Katie!" Panting, he put a hand on his naked chest. "Was this a dream? Are you giving me heart failure because of a dream?"

"I don't know, Henry. I'm sorry. I didn't think about how to break it to you. But it didn't feel like a dream."

"What didn't?"

She put her pen on the nightstand, slowly flipped pages back, and read to him from her notes. She had transcribed our conversation. I had never realized before what a good ear she had for writing down what people had said; unlike some of the other reporters on the paper, she had never been challenged for misquoting anybody, even politicians.

"It's a dream," Dad said when she had finished and they had listened to the silence for a while.

Mom blew her nose on a Kleenex. "Tessa, please unlock me again now," she said.

I told her to lie down so her body would be comfortable while she was out of it, but she couldn't hear me. I sighed and pushed the key into her chest, turned it. This time the key was quiet in my hand. Mom's body collapsed;

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Dad caught it, looking wildly around the room. Mom's spirit sat up and looked at me.

"I feel awake," she whispered. She glanced behind her, at her body and at Dad, who was in a panic. "Quick, Tess. Tell me: how did you die? Where did you die? When? We have to check. We have to find out the facts so we can deal with it. So we can...believe."

Her reporter's instincts had kicked in.

"I was killed," I said.

Her eyes squeezed shut and she winced.

"I was killed by Satanists, Mom. In an abandoned church east of town. I'm not sure of the exact directions, because Steve was driving, but we took the old Douglas Highway until we turned off on some road I was never on before. It probably happened on the stroke of midnight. Ugly, ugly. I don't want you or Dad to see it. Look at me now." I looked down at myself. I was wearing the white dress they had put me in, and I could see now that it was a mockery of a wedding gown, long-sleeved but low-cut, covered with white lace that, when I studied it, proved to be full of Satanic and cabalistic symbols. I wanted to pull the dress off and stamp on it, but I didn't know how one dealt with clothes in the afterlife. Would I be able to find anything else to wear? I growled. "Not my choice of wardrobe, Mom, but I want you to remember me whole, the way I am, not the way my body's going to look when they find it. Look well, and please believe in me."

She studied me, from my bare toes peeking out below the gown's hem to the top of my head. My hair resembled her spirit hair: loose, in dark waves that reached to my shoulder blades. I felt clean and fresh, like the breeze blowing over the midnight meadow where the grass glowed.

"All right, baby," Mom said at last. She glanced behind her. Dad was patting her body's cheek, murmuring her name in an increasingly despairing voice.

"I can unlock him too, especially if you convince him I can do it. I can only use the key three times on people who aren't ready for it, and you were my first. I might need the other two times later. If you want me to unlock you again, get your body comfortable first, okay?"

"All right," she said, and offered me a sad-edged smile. I hugged her, then let her slip back inside her body.

Dad jerked as Mom came awake. She slipped out of his embrace and

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grabbed her notebook again, writing quickly.

"What just happened?" Dad asked.

"She told me how, when, where, who," said Mom, scribbling. "It's not a dream, Henry. Tess, I believe in you. I believe."

Dad caught her wrist, stopping her from writing. "Look at me."

She stared into his eyes.

"This isn't a joke?"

Mom's face collapsed into a grimace of pain. "Oh, no, Henry. No." A tear spilled down her cheek. "I can't let myself think about it too hard yet, but it's not a joke."

"Are you going crazy?"

"No."

He released her. She finished writing, then read to him what she had written.

"Tess can — can 'unlock' me?" he asked.

"She says she can. If you believe."

He stared into her eyes for a while, and she looked back. "All right," he said, lying down, snuggling his head into a pillow. "You believe, so I will believe as best I can. Tessie, I believe you can put a key in me and unlock me so I can talk with you. Please do it."

I slid the key into his chest Again there was no thrumming sensation. I gave it a half turn, and my father sat up, staring at me with wide eyes. The squint wrinkles around his eyes he got when he didn't wear his glasses were gone, and he looked thinner too. All his hair was there, solidly black, short on the sides and long on top.

I held out my hands to him, and he reached to me. I gripped his hands. "Tessie?" he said.

"Yes, Daddy," I said, pulling him out of his body to hug him. And he hugged me, then looked back at himself.

"Oh, Tessie," he said, startled. He walked to the bed and reached out to touch his face. His hand slipped inside his body's head. "Yikes! I'm a ghost?"

"Temporarily."

"But it's not temporary with you?"

"No."

He paled. He sat down on the bed, half inside himself, without noticing. "From what Katie read me, an ugly death, Tess."

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"Yes." I hugged myself, hunching my shoulders, remembering. Pain so bad I couldn't bear to think of it. Then I remembered Hermes' healing touch and gradually relaxed. "It was awful, Dad. But I'm all right now."

"What?" he said, aghast.

I laughed, then, startled, put my hand over my mouth. "I feel better," I said, and bit my lower lip, wanting to go on with the Monty Python quote about going for a walk, thinking now was not the time. "I mean, I'm dead, and I don't hurt anymore."

Dad looked confused, but a smile came and went on his face. Then his forehead furrowed. "You're really dead, Tess?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"You're really dead." He stared at the carpet. His body's breathing was shortening; he glanced behind him at himself, then up at me. "Tess, I can't make sense out of this. It just doesn't — if you're dead, how did you get here? I mean, are you, uh, *haunting* us? I just don't...."

"It'd take me too long to explain that part right now. I have to put you back. What I *can* tell you is that I believe in a god."

"Hermes."

"Yes." I kissed him and then reached for the key. "I can unlock you again if you want me to. But I don't think I should keep you with me for too long." I nodded toward his body, which was panting in short sharp breaths.

He put his hand on my cheek and smiled at me, sad, confused, loving. I smiled back and turned the key and he sank away.

I sat on the stool while Dad told Mom what he and I had said. He wasn't as clear as Mom had been about it. He kept breaking off in the middle to shake his head and say, "I don't believe this, I don't believe this!"

Mom would just say, "And then what, Henry?" and he'd go on.

At last he said, "This is a dream, isn't it? It's more complicated than my usual dreams, but all the same...."

Mom picked up the phone and called the police station. "Hi, Betty, is Peter on tonight? Or I guess I should say this morning," she said, then listened. "Oh. I was wondering about that. Any Halloween activity from the lunatic fringe?" She perched her notebook on her knee and got her pen ready. She made a few scribbles.

Then her left hand tightened around the handset. She said, "Okay, this is going to sound odd, but do you know anything about an abandoned church

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east of town? Somewhere off the Douglas Highway?" Pause. Then she said, almost whispering, "No, I never had a psychic hunch before." Pause. "That's the call Peter's out on?" She gulped in breath and it came out a sob. The notebook and pen slid off her knee, off the bed, as she sagged against the headboard, clutching the phone's handset in both hands. Her anguished wail cut through me. Dad put his arm around her shoulders and covered his eyes with his hand.

"I'm sorry, Betty," Mom said in a choked voice. "I dreamed that my daughter just died in that church. And I had to check. And..." She was sobbing now, her shoulders jerking. She caught her breath. "I have to say good-bye now." She hung up the phone and turned into my father's embrace.

And they cried.

I walked away through the house after a little while, touching the walls, talking to the house, kissing doorsills and, with the house's consent, walking through things. I wound up in the kitchen, talking to appliances. "Let's play a game," I said to the blender. "If I touch this button, will you turn on?" I touched the button and was rewarded with a burst of engine noise. "Thanks!" I said, touching the button again. The blender turned off. I talked to the drawers, found I could open them if they felt like opening. I played with a pencil.

I discovered I could write, if the paper said it was okay.

"Tess? Tess, where are you?" my mom yelled in a hoarse voice. Carrying the pencil, I fled upstairs again, walked into their bedroom.

Mom screamed.

Startled, I dropped the pencil, then apologized to it.

Mom put a hand on her chest. Her eyes were red, and so were Dad's. "Tess? Is that you?"

I knelt, picked up the pencil, and waved it up and down—a nod, if a pencil was a head.

Mom scrabbled for her notebook on the floor, flipped it to a blank page, and held it out to me. I walked over and wrote, "Yes, it's me." Then I put a heart and signed my name.

"Oh, God," said Mom. She grabbed a Kleenex and blew her nose. "Where were you?"

"Downstairs," I wrote.

She showed it to Dad. He made a face that almost resembled a smile.

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"Okay, Tess," he said. "We're done crying for right now, I think." And he made a noise that was somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

"Tess, please unlock me," Mom said.

When her spirit sat up, it had red eyes from crying too. She blinked at me. Held out her arms. I ran to her and hugged her hard. "You're here," she murmured into my hair, "you're gone, but you're here somehow. Thank God."

"Thank Hermes," I said as she released me.

"What?"

"Those people sacrificed me to Satan, but I sacrificed myself to Hermes, and he came and got me when I died. He gave me the key, Mom."

She looked back at the heart-tipped key in her body. She looked at me, her eyes wide. "Does this mean...."

I waited a minute, then, when she didn't continue, I said, "I'm not sure what it means, except if I hadn't had Hermes, maybe I'd be in Hell now. I don't know. I don't know much more about things now than I did before. But I feel safe."

She blinked, then hugged me again. "I don't understand this. Guess I don't have to."

The phone rang. Mom turned to reach for it, and Dad reached right through her. She gasped. He pulled the handset through her, put it to his ear, said, "Yes?" in a waterlogged voice.

Pause.

He gulped air. "I know," he said hoarsely. "Katie and I dreamed it."

Pause.

"No, I can't explain that, not really."

Mom said, "He's getting this all wrong. I need to go back, Tess."

I turned the key, losing her into her body. She sat up and pulled the handset away from Dad. "Officer?" she said. "Oh. Peter." She sounded much more together than Dad had. She listened, her face stretching tight into misery. Then she said, "I know. I spoke with Betty about an hour ago." Pause. "You listened to the tape of that call? What makes me think it's Tess is — all right, I've joined the lunatic fringe here. Her spirit came to me and told me she was dead." Tears leaked down her face. "Sure," she said, "you can come over to question us. We're not in very good shape right now, but come on over. We'll be here." She hung up.

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She looked at Dad. She licked her upper lip, looked toward me: I was still where I had been when I released her. "We don't have to identify you," she said. "Peter did." She put her hands over her face, then ran her fingers through her hair. "I need a quick shower before they get here. Henry?"

"I'll come too," he said.

"Good. Henry, we're suspects."

"What?" he said, horrified.

"Because we knew. I don't think we're very good suspects, but some of what they say to us will be along those lines. Tess, excuse us, please."

I went downstairs and talked the automatic coffee maker into turning on an hour earlier than it was set for. Pretty soon my parents came down dressed in their weekend clothes, comfortable, not dressy. They still looked red-eyed and distraught. Neither of them had dried their hair. Mom stared at the coffee pot, said, "Tess?"

I talked to the cupboard. It let me open it, and two mugs let me lower them to the counter. Mom jumped.

Dad said, "Thanks," and came for the mugs, poured coffee in both. Mom got saltines out of the cupboard. They sat at the table drinking coffee and munching saltines. The doorbell rang not too long after that. Mom went to answer it and Dad got down some more mugs.

Peter looked really rummy. His mustache drooped and his hairline seemed to have receded much farther than it had the last time I saw him. I had known him all my life; he was Mom's best contact on the police force. He and Mom had gone through college together, in different departments. They had even dated a couple times. He would tell her things because he knew that if he said something was off the record she would keep it off the record. His partner was a chunky red-haired woman I had never met, and she looked tired too, dark circles under her eyes. Dad handed them mugs of coffee without even asking, got out milk and sugar. Everyone sighed and sat down. "Henry, this is Detective Garret, the case officer," Mom said, nodding to the woman. Dad shook hands with the detective.

"Katie, I'm so sorry," Peter said. "I'm so sorry." He rubbed his eyes, then looked up.

Mom said, "You know I called before anyone could have told me about its being Tess."

Peter paused, said, "You know how that looks."

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Mom buried her face in her hands. After a long moment, she whispered, "I had this dream. Tess coming to me, telling me she was dead. Satanists in a church east of town. It was so real, Peter. I had to call. I had to find out. Hoped it wasn't true. But..." She drew in breath, looked up. Her face was pale, her cheeks hollowed. She exhaled.

"All right," he said gently.

"She tell you anything else, Ma'am?" asked Detective Garret.

"Well," said Mom, and sniffled. "She said dying was horrible, but she feels better now."

Both officers shuddered. "From your lips to God's ear," Garret said. Then she said: "No hints about who? Didn't name anybody?"

"No. I'll ask. But that wouldn't be admissible, would it?"

"Katie — you'll ask? You'll *ask?*" Peter said.

"If she comes to me in a dream again."

"If she does," said Garret, "ask her how they abducted her, will you? This is the second year this has happened. We've got to stop it."

For the first time I remembered that they had killed somebody last Halloween, too. Not here in Holdfield, but in Mostyn, a little town six miles south. A girl named Deedee Christie, sixteen; the police had withheld most of the details, but the stories going around were so gross I had gotten sick just thinking about them, and I had put them out of my mind.

Last Halloween, this Halloween — what about next Halloween?

"Sheila!" Peter said to his partner.

"Hey, I've seen this psychic stuff before. Maybe there's a lead here." She turned to Mom. "Names would be a big help. We don't know what the physical evidence means yet. We have to wait on the crime lab."

"I'll find out what I can," Mom said.

Dad flushed. "We'll find out. We have to get them."

"Henry!" said Peter. "You're wrong. *We* have to get them."

Mom sighed. "Let's do the alibi part now," she said.

"Okay," said Peter. "Where were you two last night?"

"I got home at four and started dinner," Dad said.

"I got off work at 5:30," said Mom. "I stopped at the market for little candy bars."

"We had dinner around six, and answered the door to trick-or-treaters until sometime after nine. We watched TV and worked in the living room

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until after midnight, then went to bed," Dad said.

"Did you recognize any of the trick-or-treaters?" Garret asked.

"Oh, sure, lots of the neighborhood kids," Dad said. "Let's see. The Hartleys, the Dimitriades — they live across the street — and some of my English students came by for a joke, dressed as punks and vandals — "

"Henry, that's how they always dress," Mom said. "Name names."

Dad reeled off a list of six kids' names and Garret wrote them down in her notebook. Mom added a few names. She said, "The last one came during "Murphy Brown," so it was a little after nine. That would be Stu Scott — he brought his four-year-old Chris by.... We were brushing our teeth after midnight, and in bed by 12:30.

"I dreamed Tess at about 4:30," Mom continued. She frowned. "Is that right? What time did I call Betty, Peter?"

He checked his notes. "Four fifty-one."

"So I don't think we have an alibi, except each other, for the crucial period."

"What do you think is the crucial period, Katie?" Peter asked my mother gently.

"Tess figured they probably killed her on the stroke of midnight." Mom began to shake. "Oh, Tessie, where were you for those missing hours?" she asked, and closed her eyes. Her hands gripped each other on the table in front of her. She trembled.

Even if I could have figured out a way to answer her without using the key or the notepad, I wasn't sure what the answer would be. Maybe time passed differently in the midnight meadow. To reassure Mom, I spoke to a spoon, which agreed to fall off the table, and it bounced metallically on the floor. Everybody jumped. Mom opened her eyes.

"All right," she said. "So keep us on the suspect list. Just don't stop with us. We need to catch the people who actually did it."

"Agreed," said Peter. He glanced at Garret, who spoke up.

"Mrs. Hector, Mr. Hector — I know this is an awkward time — but you seem to understand — would it be all right with you if we just, kind of, looked around the house?"

Dad paled.

Mom said, "Of course, Detective." She frowned. "We took a shower. I suppose that looks bad. We were just crying for an hour and I felt so...soggy...."

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"It's all right, Katie," Peter said. "It's all right. Do you need us to call anybody for you, a doctor? A priest? Anything we can do?"

"We haven't thought that far ahead," said Mom. She laid her head down on her arms on the table. "Tess, please...."

I unlocked her. She jumped to her feet, stared at me a moment, then gripped my shoulders. "I was losing it," she said. She gave me a quick hug. "It's hard for me to believe you're actually here as the evidence mounts about your death."

"Believe, Mom. Have faith."

"Yes," she said. She kissed my cheek. "Who killed you?"

"There were thirteen people, but the only one I knew was a guy I'd been dating named Steve Moore. His address is 880 Larch Street. He told me he was taking me to a Halloween party."

"How am I going to tell this to Peter?"

I paused. "Do you want me to let him know I'm here? Move things around and stuff?"

"I don't think he believes in ghosts."

"But I could *prove* — "

Back in the solid world, Peter was touching Mom's body's shoulder. "Katie? Are you all right?" he said.

"Gotta go," said Mom. I locked her in her body again.

She sat up with a groan. "Need a notebook," she said.

Garret flipped to a blank page in her police notepad and set it and a pen in front of Mom. "Steve Moore," she wrote, "1880 Larch Street." I slipped the pen from her hand and started scratching out the "1." She grabbed the pen quickly and finished.

"Katie! What just happened?" Peter said.

Mom looked at Garret, who stared at her. "It's Tess," Mom said at last. "I know this sounds...unreasonable." She shook her head, smiling a little. Tapping the notebook, she said, "Tess was dating this man, who told her he was taking her to a Halloween party. She said there were twelve other people besides him at the church."

Peter and Garret gave each other significant looks.

"I'm not crazy," Mom said.

"We'll check this out," Garret said, retrieving her notebook and pen. Figuring I had nothing to lose, I got permission from the pen, eeled it out of

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Garret's hand before she could put it away, and wrote Steve's phone number on the upturned page of the notebook. Garret screamed and tossed the notebook and pen on the floor.

"Sheila?" Peter said.

"It moved!"

Peter knelt on the floor, inched the pen over next to the notebook, stared at them both for a while.

"It wrote something," said Garret.

Mom stared down at the notebook. "His phone number. I forgot to ask." She yawned. "I'm worn out."

"We both need sleep," Dad said. "Detectives, if you don't mind, I think we'll go upstairs and lie down for a while. Feel free to look around. Tess can help you; just ask."

"Henry?" Peter said.

Dad yawned against the back of his hand, tried to look alert.

"Tess is dead."

"I know," Dad said. "She came home and told us about it." His eyes drifted shut. "Excuse me, Peter."

Mom stumbled to her feet, said, "You better come upstairs with us, check out the bedroom and master bath while we're falling asleep. Then the rest of the house. Lock the door on your way out."

"Tess," said Peter, still kneeling on the floor by the notebook. "Write something else for me, will you?"

I knelt across from him and, greeting it, grasped the pen. He sucked in breath as the pen rose upright. I wrote a question mark on the paper.

"Can you describe one of your injuries?"

"Broke all my fingers," I wrote.

Garret and Peter stared at each other. Peter lifted an eyebrow.

"That's right," Garret said. "I was talking to the crime lab while they processed the body. Every knuckle bone."

"Oh, Tess!" Mom cried.

For a moment, remembered pain crippled my hands, but I remembered healing and the pain retreated again.

"Tess," said Peter hoarsely, "you remember what I gave you on your fifth birthday?"

I had to think about that one. Which birthday was five? We weren't

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living in this house yet; we'd been in a small apartment on Water Street until I was six, and my bedroom was the closet off the master bedroom. Five. A cake with a carousel pony on it. Peter had happened by to tell Mom something, stumbled into our party, stayed for cake and ice cream. After dessert, and my two presents — a plastic horse with a red saddle, a big stuffed bear — Peter had whispered to me: "I didn't bring you anything you can touch, but I give you a wish and a promise. If you need help, I'll give it to you. Just ask."

I wrote, "A wish and a promise. Help me."

A small choked sob burst out of him. Garret put her hand on his shoulder and he glanced up at her.

I wrote, "I didn't mean it like that. I'm okay, for a dead person."

"We didn't stop it from happening!" he said.

I wrote, "How could you?"

"We were watching for something like this, waiting for it because of last year, but we never thought it would be at Trinity. I never thought...I never thought it would be *you*, Tess — "

Garret gripped his shoulder. "Do you want to be taken off the case?" she said.

He took a deep breath, let it out. "I don't — I don't *want* to," he said. "I'll think about it. But look: Tess can tell us who...."

"She only knows the one name," Mom said.

"But we could do a line-up of known associates — "

"Peter, get a grip," said Mom.

He stared at her. He blinked. He said, "Oh. Right. This wouldn't exactly go over well downtown. But Tess could help." He got to his feet, gripping the notebook. "We better chase this lead before it evaporates, if it hasn't already. Sheila?"

"We haven't searched the house yet."

He sighed. "Right. I'll tell Sorenson about Mr. Moore, get him and Walsh on this guy."

But by the time anyone went to Steve's apartment, Steve had disappeared. He left nothing behind that carried the least trace of him, not even fingerprints.

Mom and Dad packed up the things in my apartment. Mom had a bad

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moment when she found half-done homework on my desk, my textbook lying open. Dad got upset listening to the messages on my phone machine; the morning after I died a message came from Sasha, saying, "Tess, you will not believe! I have to talk to you! Call me even if it's late at night, will you?"

He set the steno pad he and Mom carried with them on my desk, put the pencil beside it, and said, after a moment, "You want me to tell her something?"

The pencil, pad, and I were old friends now. I wrote, "No." Either Sasha had the boyfriend of her dreams, or she'd achieved some academic honor or something. Maybe she'd come up with a new theory of psychosis. In any case she probably wasn't so interested in telling me about it now.

My parents took my altar to Hermes and set it up on the mantel at home. With every meal they made an offering of food and drink, sometimes burning incense.

Mom let someone else on the paper handle the story of my death. She took a leave of absence from her job.

We adjusted to our new relationship.

SASHA ARRIVED at my parents' house before the funeral, enveloped in a green cape, the scent of autumn leaves hanging around her like perfume. Her auburn hair hung lusterless to her shoulders, and her hazel eyes looked too large in her face. She had lost weight since I last saw her in August. She looked tense and nervous. "I'm so terribly sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Hector," she said, standing on the front porch, her hands buried in her pockets, her shoulders hunched.

"Come in, come in," Mom said, putting an arm around Sasha's shoulders and wafting her into the house.

"Tess is so glad you're here," said Dad.

Sasha paled as Mom closed the door behind her. She looked around the front hall as if searching for a fast exit.

I tugged on Dad's sleeve. "Oh," he said. "Wrong thing to say, eh? Sorry, Sasha. I'm getting absent-minded."

"That's quite all right," she said in a thin voice.

"We're glad you could make it, Sasha," said Mom. Sasha glanced at her sharply. I thought Mom sounded a little too cheerful for a funeral too. More

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like she had just gotten a positive R.S.V.P. for a birthday party.

But then, everybody thought my parents were much too chirpy for having lost their daughter in such an ugly way.

"You're more than welcome to stay here," Dad said.

Sasha wavered, then said, "I'd like that. My folks are in Europe, and I — I'd rather not be alone in the house right now."

"Good. Good," said Dad. "Would you like tea or cocoa? You look chilled."

"I do feel cold."

"Come into the kitchen."

When they had her sitting between them at the kitchen table with a mug of cocoa warming her hands, and her cape half off, Mom said, "Sasha, we do need to tell you about Tess. When you're ready."

"What is there to tell?"

"There are some things she wanted you to know," Dad said.

"Did she leave me a letter?"

"Kind of," said Mom.

"Is it private?"

"She told us, too."

Sasha sipped cocoa, looking back and forth between my mom and my dad. She had never spent much time at my house. Her parents had a big screen TV and an air corn popper, so we had watched movies at her house. The rest of the time we were out in the weather, sneaking off someplace, or searching out obscure Greekisms in the library. "I think," she said. "I think I'm ready."

Mom picked up the steno pad. "Faith is rewarding," she read.

Sasha frowned. "That doesn't sound like Tess! Did she find Jesus before she died?" she said, then gasped. "Oh! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"Why?" asked Dad.

"Because of the way — "

"Oh." He thought for a second. "That would be ironic, wouldn't it? She finds Jesus and dies at the hands of Satanists?"

"How can you say that?" Sasha asked, shocked.

"Because you could think it. It's all right, Sasha. We're not nuts. Really we aren't. And we're not denying what happened. We...."

"We've had a lot of help," said Mom. "Sasha, Tess wants you to know that faith in Hermes is justified."

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Sasha's mug banged down on the tabletop. The color drained out of her face. "No," she said, "no. I'm getting out of here." She stood up.

"What are you afraid of?" Dad asked.

"Tess would never have told you any of this! The Sisterhood was secret. What have you done? Gone through all her private things, like ghouls?"

"We did whatever Tess asked us to," Mom said. "But I do think if my daughter was dead and I didn't know how she would want her things disposed of, I really think it would be all right for me to read whatever record she left behind. I think that would be a parent's prerogative."

"We didn't have to do that, because her ghost is here," said Dad.

"Oh, no," said Sasha, shaking her head. "No. You're gone. Right round the bend."

I grabbed my friend the pencil and wrote to Mom, "Ask her if that's the technical psychological term for this."

Mom sat back with her arms crossed while I wrote, and when I was finished, she flicked her eyebrows at Sasha, who had been watching the pencil move. Sasha, her hands shaking, leaned over far enough to read the message. She licked her lips. "No," she said. "I don't know what the diagnosis would be for this. Severe psycho-social stressors, I bet." Then she fell back into her chair. "Tess?" she whispered.

"Yes," I wrote.

"It's your handwriting. Is it really you?"

"Yes," I wrote. "I'm a wandering shade. I wanted to wander over to where you are, but I don't know much about traveling yet, especially to someplace I've never been. I'm glad you came, Sasha."

She reached out and touched the paper, tracing the letters of her name with her fingertip. She shivered. Then she looked up at Mom and Dad.

"If you actually want to *see* her, to talk to her, she can unlock your spirit from your body, and then it's like she's standing in front of you," Dad said. "If you're prepared to risk it."

She thought about that for a while. She took a sip of cocoa, licked chocolate off her lip. She touched my writing again. "Does it hurt?"

"No," said Mom. "Unless you're not braced for it. Then you can bruise yourself."

"How do I brace for it?"

Mom showed her how to lay her head and arms on the tabletop. With

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her cheek pressed to the formica, Sasha said, "Okay. I'm ready."

I slid the key into her. It thrummed as I turned it, telling me she hadn't believed—and I'd used up another of my chances. I figured that was all right. After Mom and Dad and Sasha, I couldn't think of anybody else I'd want to use the key on.

Sasha's spirit sat up and looked around. She looked just the same out of her body as she had inside it. "Tess," she whispered. Her eyes got wide. She patted her chest, looked down at her quiet body, reached for it, gasped when her hand went through it. "Tess?" She trembled.

I held out my hands to her and she took them. I pulled her free of her body. "Oh, Tess," she said, and hugged me. Her spirit self was breathing short and shallow, like a terrified animal. I stroked her back until she quieted. "Are you really here?" she murmured.

"As far as I can tell," I said.

"This is delusional."

I gripped her shoulders, pushed her away so we could stare into each other's faces. I gave her a small smile, then burst into a grin. "I told you that stuff was going to get you into trouble."

"No, I mean it, Tess. I thought I had experienced my grief, or some of it, anyway. I've been talking on a hotline to the crisis people. I found a group. Haven't been to it yet, but I mean, I've been preparing myself to deal with this, not bury it or do something unhealthy with it, but dammit, look, here I am, having this really, really weird hallucination — "

I remembered something she had told me in a letter. "Call it guided imagery," I said, not knowing what I was talking about but figuring it sounded better than delusions or hallucinations.

"Huh?" She looked shocked. "Oh. Oh! Okay..." She looked around, shrugged, smiled at me. Then her face went serious. "It was a nightmare," she said, "reading about your death."

"He came and rescued me, Sasha."

"He?"

"Hermes," I said, and then he stood beside me and smiled down at Sasha.

"Oh my god," she said, and he laughed.

"This is what I wanted you to know. It's real," I said.

"Oh my god."

"I hear your prayers, even when there is no faith behind them," he said.

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"The mere act of praying generates faith."

"Oh my god."

"A short prayer, but a useful one." He touched Sasha's head. "I am glad you found me, priestess." He vanished.

"Tess!" Sasha wailed.

"It's okay, Sasha. Really it is. When you have time to think about this...." I shook my head. I didn't know what she would think. "Listen, I should put you back now. If you stay out too long your body has trouble breathing. I just wanted you to know I'm still here for a while — until I feel ready to go on — so if you want to talk, just tell me. I can do the pencil thing, or I can unlock you. I can hear you. If I'm near, anyway."

She touched my face. She stroked my hair. She looked behind her at the table, where Mom and Dad sat beside her still form, sipping their own cocoa and not saying anything. "Tess..."

"Yes?"

"Don't you hate those people for hurting you?"

"Yes," I said. "That's one of the things keeping me here. I guess I'm not supposed to hate them, but I do. I want them hurt. He says it'll wear off, but I haven't lost it yet."

"Oh," she said. She sighed and went to stand by her body. I relocked her spirit inside her. She took a few deep breaths and sat up. Then she sat there shaking her head and looking at my parents, who smiled at her.

"Feel better?" Mom asked.

Sasha changed her shake to a nod. She bit her lower lip. "I feel — " Trembling took her over. She sat in the chair and shook for a while. Mom patted her shoulder and waited it out.

"Was this hard for you?" Sasha asked them at last.

"It would have been much worse if she hadn't come back," said Dad.

"I've been playing with this belief for five years," Sasha said. "I thought it was just a game. But I just met my god." She got up and started pacing around. "People aren't supposed to be able to *meet* their gods, that's the point of gods, they're just ideas off in the mist somewhere and people use god-ideas to control their own behavior or excuse it or something, but...." She paced and paced. "First I meet a *ghost*, and then I meet a god I thought I made up — and she tells me it's guided imagery, but who the hell is the guide? And — "

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"Rough day," said Dad. "Maybe you need to lie down?"

"Yes," said Sasha. "Yes."

"Will you be okay in Tess's old room?"

"Yes," said Sasha, with a huge sigh.

Peter and I had a date the evening before the funeral. I went to the police station by thinking about what it looked like; I'd been there before, dropping off doughnuts sometimes or just to ask Peter questions. I went to Peter's desk. He asked me in a whisper if I was there, and I moved a pen; we went to the interrogation room and talked.

"It's spooky, Tess," he said. "He rented the apartment under the name Calvin Black. He got phone service in the name Richard Small, and the electric bill charges someone named Bob Dark. None of these people exists, as far as we can tell. He's made a career of being invisible, creating new selves."

I sat down. I sketched a picture of Steve's face, wondering why I hadn't done this before. Maybe because I didn't think I could draw very well. But light from black candles had burned his face into my mind. Now that the pencil was my friend, it helped me draw what I was picturing.

I finished Steve and drew four of the other people from memory.

"Great," said Peter, taking the sketches. "We'll make copies. We can ask all kinds of questions with these."

I wasn't paying much attention to my memorial service. I was looking at the flowers banked around my closed casket, moving the cards just enough to read them, and I was looking at members of my family whom I hadn't seen since the family Fourth of July picnic last summer, aunts and uncles and cousins all dressed in dark colors and looking sad; and sometimes I watched Mom and Dad and Sasha in the front pew. Sasha sat next to Dad; Dad sat next to Mom; Mom sat next to Flo Moskowitz, a sixty-ish friend of Mom's from the newspaper, somebody I'd called Aunt Flo since I was six. Flo was covering the funeral for the paper — she had been covering the whole story of my murder.

The steno pad lay between Sasha and the pew's edge, shielded from casual view by her skirt and the flare of the pew's end.

I felt strange and sad, and wondered how everybody was doing. My

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cousin Marisha was actually crying. I had never seen her cry before. My dad's brother, Uncle Jake, had reddened eyes; he was holding tight to Aunt Mary's hand. Well, sure, I had always liked him too. He had taught me chess, and I had spent most of my twelfth summer at his house with my cousins Amy, Bert, and Lucy.

Feeling like I was peeping at private grief, I walked further back, wondering who all these people were; I didn't know half of them. Friends of Mom's and Dad's from work, I decided after some study.

Steve slipped in about halfway through the service.

I couldn't believe it.

He had a black suit on, and a black bolo tie with a silver scorpion clasp; and even though one of the ushers tried to direct him to a seat, he stood in back, his arms crossed over his chest, and just listened.

I stared at his face, but he wasn't wearing an expression. I wondered what he felt. Had he gotten satisfaction out of what he had done to me? Did Satan let his followers know when he was pleased with them? Or displeased with them? After my encounters with my own god, I wasn't sure what other peoples' did for them.

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Steve frowned.

I remembered who I was and where. I glanced down at myself. Since my death I had been wearing the white bridal dress Steve had given me Halloween night, though without the stains and rips it had acquired in the course of that night. I held out my hands and my fingers curled into fists. Rage ignited inside me, flaring high until I felt as if anything I touched would burst into flame. How dare he! How dare he take me when I trusted him, take me and hurt me and kill me? How dare he come here after having done that?

I found myself beside the front pew. I reached through the wood, gripped the pencil, and wrote, "He's here. At the back of the chapel. The man who killed me." I threw the pencil down. It bounced once and then rolled off the pew.

Mom, Dad, Sasha glanced over. Flo glanced over. Sasha's eyes widened as she read what I had written. Then she pressed the steno pad to her breast, hiding it from Flo. She gave a little nervous smile and bent to retrieve the pencil. Flo faced front again. Sasha handed the pad to Dad, who gave Mom a glimpse of it. All three of them turned to look at Steve.

After a moment he felt their regard and stared back at them. His eyes

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were ice-cold. How had I ever found him friendly? Danger was like a black shroud around him, edged with silver.

Dad half rose. I tugged on his sleeve. "We can't let him get away," he whispered.

Steve was smiling now. My anger was freezing into fear. Steve could still hurt me by hurting Dad or Mom. They were forewarned — but Steve had lots of friends, some of them possibly augmented by their faith. I pulled Dad's sleeve hard. He sat down again, muttering, "What? What?"

"Henry, are you all right?" Flo asked.

Above us the priest was still talking about his god and my life. Dad looked around, then said, "Flo, the murderer is standing in the back of the chapel. I want to stop him before he gets away."

Flo glanced back at Steve, who smiled at her, too. "My God," she said. She swallowed. "How do you know? The police haven't been able to find anything solid."

"Trust me on this."

"I'll go call the cops." She slipped out the end of the pew, and slid soundlessly down the side aisle toward the back. Dad kept his eye on Steve.

Steve moved over and blocked Flo's exit, catching her wrist. But by this time some of the other people had noticed Dad constantly looking back, and they turned too, to see Steve hanging onto Flo as she tried to twist free.

The priest paused. "Young man?" he said, which I thought took guts, since the priest looked barely older than Steve, and much less effective.

Steve smiled.

"Is there a problem? You're disturbing our service."

"I'm sorry. I came to the wrong place," said Steve. "I was looking for the funeral of a girl who died in service to God. Come on, Ma." Keeping his grip on Flo's wrist, he pulled her out the door.

Mom stood up. Dad started to his feet again. Before he had gotten very far, I unlocked him. His body sagged back down in the pew. Sasha stared at him, then looked around as if searching for a shadow. "Dad, *stay here,*" I said. "I'll follow them. Don't let him get you, too."

"Tell me what happens, tell me where they go, Tess — oh, Tess — "

"He's dangerous, Dad. Stay here." I locked him in and fled after Steve and Flo.

Who hadn't gotten very far. Flo was yelling, gripping the arm of one of

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the solemn young men in black who drifted around the corridors in the funeral home. "Help me," she said, "Help me, this man is a murderer."

"Up to your old tricks, Ma?" said Steve. He smiled at the young man. In a silver voice, he said, "She has these psychotic episodes. The doctor cautioned me against restimulating her with this funeral, but I just thought — such a close member of the family — she ought to have a chance to say good-bye. I think I'd better get her back to Reston. Come on, Ma." He pulled her fingers off the young man's arm one at a time.

"Help me," Flo said. "This man murdered Tess Hector."

Steve still smiled. I remembered that smile. It was his most irresistible one, the one that insisted we were in a conspiracy together, and wasn't it fun? He was using it full power on the young man.

"I'm Florence Moskowitz with the Holdfield *Guardian*, and this man is trying to silence me," said Flo. "Call the police!"

The young man looked bewildered. He opened his mouth.

"I appeal to you as one human being to another," Flo said in a low voice. "Help me. Help me." She kicked at Steve's crotch.

"Now, now, Ma," said Steve, pinching her shoulder. She grimaced.

"I — " said the young man. Steve smiled at him again and jerked Flo out of the building.

"You've got a good spirit in you," Steve said to Flo, dragging her toward his car, a black mid-seventies Mustang. "I like that."

Flo screamed. She struck him in the face with her free hand, and kicked at him. He pinched her shoulder again and she wilted.

I thrust the skeleton key into Steve's chest and turned it. It thrummed in my hand. His body tumbled to the concrete sidewalk. Flo broke its grip on her and fled.

Steve's spirit stood naked before me. He was tall and pale and starved-looking. On his spirit skin there were a million wounds and scabs, some old and crusty, some fresh and bleeding. As I watched, he clawed at the scab over his heart, pulled it until fresh blood flowed. Then he stared at his reddened fingers with their rosy halo of spirit blood. At length he looked up at me.

"Tess," he said. He stared at me from my bare toes to the curly hair on my head. "What are you doing still here? Is this why the Master was so angry? Because you never crossed over?" He raked his fingernails across his stomach, swiping left and right, opening fresh wounds.

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"You can't spend what I've already donated," I said. I searched myself for the rage that had fueled me in the chapel, but it was gone now, replaced by a creeping horror at what Steve was doing to himself.

"You have broken my communion with my god by being an imperfect sacrifice," Steve said, and pulled off a great scab on his head. "I will never regain his trust. I worked so hard, so long to get where I was — "

He flickered. For a moment I saw a little boy in his place, small, frightened, wounded, cupping his hands over his genitals and looking up with huge eyes for the next bruising blow. Inside him there flared a white light, which dimmed immediately. For a moment I saw the little boy melt into a tall shadow, its arm upraised to strike.

" — and you destroyed everything!" And then he was lunging at me, reaching for me with his dripping red hands.

I closed my eyes and stepped into the midnight meadow, where I trembled and looked all around to see if Steve had somehow followed me. But I was alone.

"Hermes," I whispered, and my god came to me, stepping out of the air. "I'm frightened," I said.

He hugged me. After a little while, he whispered, "You are under my protection. He cannot harm you anymore."

"I didn't know if you knew what was happening."

"I learned."

I leaned my head against his chest, absorbing his support. Then I pushed away a little. "All right," I said. "I'll go back."

"Here," he said, handing me his caduceus.

Wordless, I gripped it. It was lighter than it looked, the twined serpents somehow balancing it so that its weight lay in some other plane.

He laid his palm on my forehead. I felt warmth flowing from his hand, melting into me like sunlight.

"Thank you," I said. I closed my eyes, thinking of the sidewalk in front of the funeral home, and took a step.

Steve's shade was plucking at his body, trying to slip back inside. The body's breathing was laboring and ragged. Dad, Mom, Sasha, and Flo stood around it. Mom's eyes were like ice. Sasha was hugging herself. Flo had a stick gripped in her hand, and she was looking down at Steve as though just waiting for him to show a sign of life so she could pound him. Dad kept

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swallowing, his hands fisting and unfisting, his face lost between sadness and fury. I could hear approaching sirens, still distant.

"Tess," said Sasha, urgently. "Tess, where are you?"

I went to Steve. His spirit looked up at me. "Are you trying to kill me?" he said.

"Turnabout," I began, but the caduceus stirred in my hand. I stared at the snakes on it and they stared back. "Steve," I said, and held the wand out. Golden light flowed from it, washing down over Steve; under that gentle flood, his sores and scabs washed away, leaving his skin clean and whole.

"No!" he screamed. "No, you're destroying my identity!"

I lifted the caduceus, cutting off the flow of healing. "You *like* what you are?"

"This is who I am," he said. He scratched a new bloody furrow across his chest. "All my life has led me here. Finally I'm in a place of power, and you want to make me helpless? If you take away my strengths, I'll lose myself." Then he grimaced. "Yes. I'd do that to you if I could." He stared narrow-eyed at the caduceus as if expecting it to attack him.

"But — " I remembered the clear white light inside the little boy, and looked for it. Inside Steve there was only darkness. Except the little boy had been inside Steve, too.... "But — I can't wait any longer," I said, and leaned down to twist the key in his chest and lock him back in his body.

The body's breathing strengthened. Presently Steve opened his eyes, looking up at the people around him.

"Just lie still," said Dad. "Help is coming."

"Are you crazy?" Steve asked, his voice raw. He tried to get up, but he'd been away too long. Flo raised her stick. Mom pushed Steve down with the toe of her shoe, then stepped on his arm.

"Probably I am," said Dad. He unclenched his fists, stared at his open hands, frowned down at Steve, shook his head. An ambulance and a police car pulled up simultaneously. Steve struggled to get up again, and again he failed. Dad knelt beside him. "Why did you do it?" he whispered to Steve. "Why did you kill my daughter?"

"My god wants innocent blood," Steve muttered. "My blood isn't good enough. My god wants me to prove I love him. When I give him the perfect sacrifice, that's when he'll love me back." He frowned then, and glared at Dad, as if he was angry because Dad had made him say something.

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Dad touched Steve's hand. Then the ambulance guys were shooing everybody away so they could take Steve's pulse and blood pressure and lift him onto a stretcher.

"Your daughter couldn't even die right," Steve yelled as they put him in the ambulance.

STEVE NEVER confessed to anything. I went to see him in jail. He had shrouded himself in darkness, staring out of it with burning eyes. Gone was any trace of the frightened child; something or someone or some circumstance had granted him his wish for power. He saw me even though I did not use the key on him again, and he cursed me. His curse took the form of a red splash flying from his mouth toward me. I waited, afraid, for it to land, but it melted before it touched me.

He smiled at me, and behind his eyes I could see his god. It bared its fangs at me. For a moment I saw Steve covered in red whip welts, shimmering over him like tiger stripes. He closed his eyes and drank in breath as if it and the pain were fine wine.

I couldn't talk to Dad or Mom or Sasha about this at all; so I spoke to Hermes. He told me, "You spend your lives building gods to care for you."

"His god is hungry for more people to believe in it." I had sensed that the darkness was mostly mouth.

Hermes kissed my forehead. "Most of us are. Some more rapacious than others."

"It wanted to eat me."

"It cannot eat you so long as you are mine."

With my sketches Peter tracked down some of the other people from Halloween night, and they weren't as strong in their faith as Steve had become; eventually Peter had the whole baker's dozen, some of whom confessed, implicating the rest. I waited to feel satisfaction, but it did not come. I was still dead.

"Tess?" said Mom six months later. "Tess, are you here?" She was sitting at the kitchen table. She had the pad and pencil out for me. "Where are you?"

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I wrote a heart on the pad.

"Where've you been?" she said.

"Checking on things," I wrote. But it was not true. I had been nowhere until her voice roused me, and I had the feeling she had been saying my name a long time.

"You're gone so much lately."

I didn't know what to tell her.

"I just worry," she said.

"Aw, Mom," I wrote, "what could happen?"

"You could go away," she said, and rubbed a tear off her cheek. She leaned over, putting her head on the table.

I brought out my key, polished with use, but tarnishing a little now. I unlocked her. She stood up and looked at me, and I looked back.

I said, "My work here is done." Until the words came out of my mouth, I hadn't known they were waiting inside me. They didn't even sound like something I'd say. I figured it must be a quote, but I couldn't remember what from.

"I know." She gave me that tight smile that has tears hidden in it. "I just hoped we'd get a chance to say good-bye before you left."

I hugged her. It felt just like a real hug, a hard one, flesh and bones, breath and beating heart to beating heart. "I love you," I said. "That doesn't change."

"I know," she said.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

IN SEPTEMBER, we return to **Mike Conner**'s wonderful Guide Dog universe. "Guide Dog," which appeared in our May, 1991, issue, won the Nebula Award given by the Science Fiction Writers of America. Mike has since returned to that fascinating sf world twice, this last time with a spectacular novella, "In the Eye of the Moon." The novella also serves as the inspiration for next month's cover story.

Also in September, **Lynn Hightower**, creator of one of the most successful sf detectives, returns with a very creepy story about responsibility. "The Point Man" is set in an ocean front condo, where Sidnee and her family have come to relax. Only Sidnee witnesses a horrible tragedy — and in a moment of fateful decision, finds herself choosing between her family and her life.

F&SF regulars **Marc Laidlaw** and **Paul Di Filippo** combine their considerable talents in a haunting and image-rich story, "Sleep Is Where You Find It." The photographer Weegee is heading to a crime scene he heard about on his police radio when a young girl materializes in his car. He's relieved — she's beautiful, unlike many of the ghosts that plague him. Then he recognizes her as the shade of a living girl he once photographed sleeping on a tenement balcony. What does she want with him? What do any of them want with him? He doesn't know, and he's not sure he wants to find out.

September will round itself out with columns by **Gregory Benford, Orson Scott Card,** and **John Kessel.**

In future issues, **Esther M. Friesner** provides humor while **Jane Yolen** adds a few chills. John W. Campbell Award Nominee **Carrie Richerson** returns as does **Jack Cady**. **Nancy Springer** provides gentle fantasy. **Robert Reed, R. Garcia y Robertson, Bridget McKenna,** and **Carolyn Ives Gilman** contribute excellent cover stories. Also prepare yourself for our anniversary issue — a double issue, filled with almost twice the normal amount of fiction, including a spectacular novella from **Walter Jon Williams**. Make sure your subscriptions are up to date. This fall provides a succession of do-not-miss issues.

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YOU'RE HERE, YOU'RE THERE, YOU'RE NOWHERE WITH
DR. QUARK
WELL, MADGE - YOU WANTED PARIS, I'M GIVING YOU PARIS.
THERE'S JUST SOMETHING MISSING
HOW ABOUT A BEACH IN HAWAII. WHAT CAN BEAT THAT?
I THINK A BEACH IN HAWAII CAN BEAT IT.
WE COULDN'T HAVE ARRIVED HERE ANY FASTER.
MAYBE I MISS THE TURMOIL OF THE FLIGHT.
O.K. - WE'LL FLY HOME, AND ANYONE WE WANT CAN COME ALONG WITH US. HOW ABOUT HONEST ABE?
I THINK VIRTUAL REALITY IS TOO EXHAUSTING FOR ME. NOW I NEED A REAL VACATION.
THERE'S AN AREA IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA THAT'S VERY POPULAR THESE DAYS.
WHAT'S THE ATTRACTION?
IT'S CRAWLING WITH VIRTUAL REALITY PARLORS. THEY'RE ALL OVER THE PLACE.
S. MATTIS

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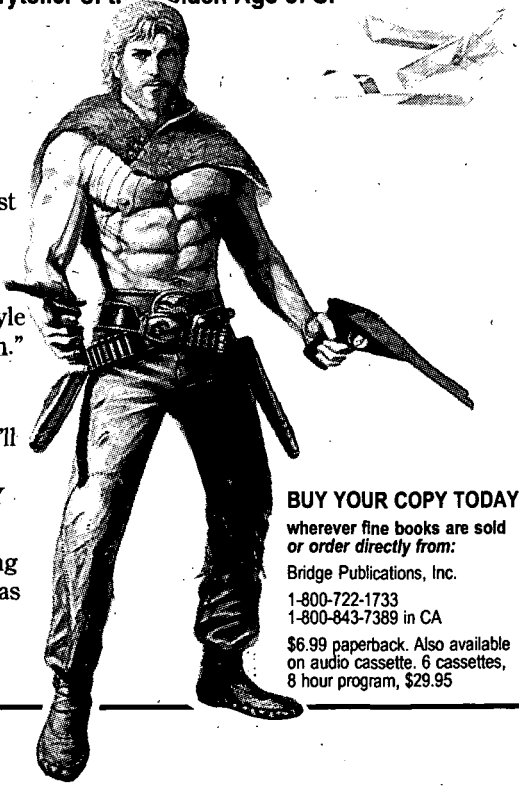

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